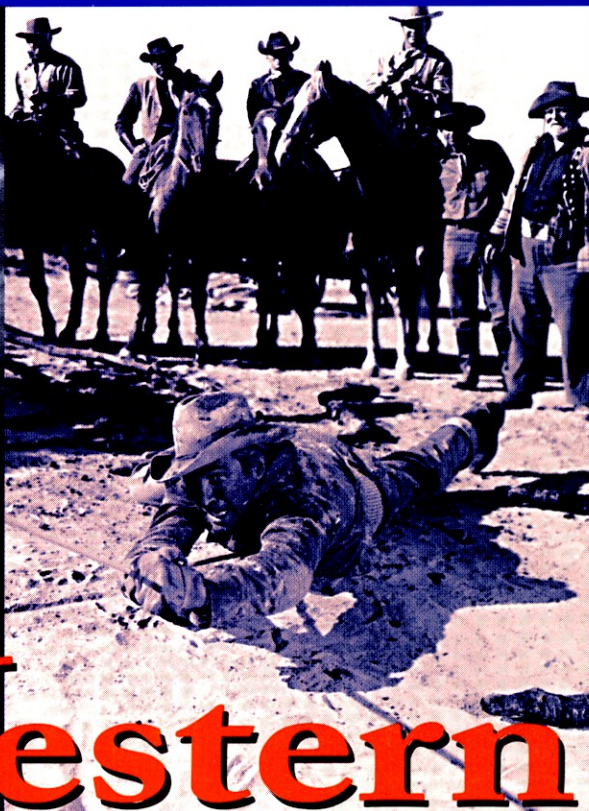
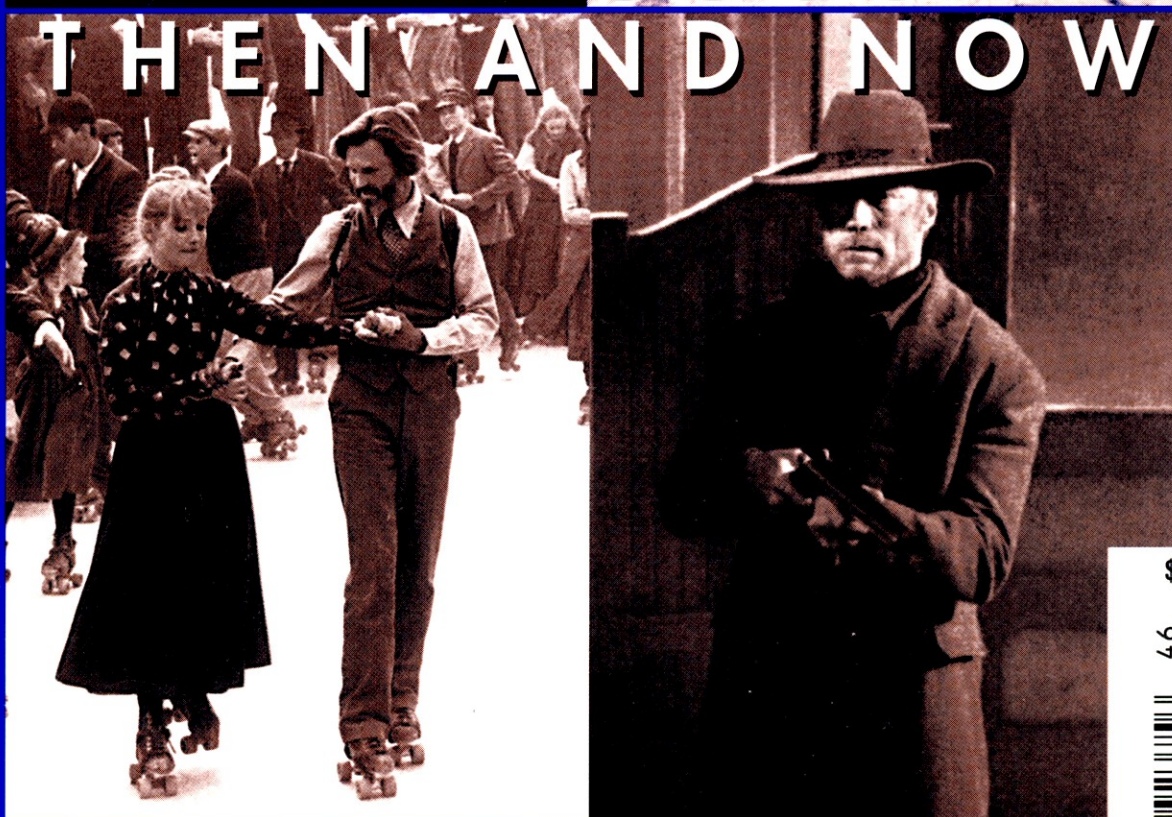


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*cine*ACTION



The Western



THEN AND NOW

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THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

Design: Bob Wilcox

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Mailing address:

40 Alexander St., Suite 705
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Canada, M4Y 1B5
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EDITORIAL

'All westerns are about genocide'.

The remark was reported to me at second- or third-hand, so I cannot vouch for its accuracy. It strikes me, however, as the *kind* of generalization — its air of vague plausibility concealing its function — which is bandied about all too glibly in much current critical practice: its function being to block the exercise of discrimination and comparative valuation that should be central to *any* critical practice worthy of the name. It should be impossible for any serious consideration of Ford (for example) today to evade the issue of genocide, so long as the discussion begins (rather than ends) there; and there are plenty of westerns from the last few decades (*Soldier Blue*, *Little Big Man*, *Dead Man*) where the issue cannot be avoided because it is what the films are centrally and explicitly *about*. But the generalization is singularly unhelpful if one applies it to, for example, *Shane*, *The Tall T*, *Man of the West* or *The Wild Bunch*. We know, of course, that the development of white civilization in the West was built upon genocide, but that is not directly relevant to the thematics of these films. This issue of *CineAction* is devoted less to generalizations than to the careful examination of particular westerns, 'classical' and 'modern': any generalizations grow (as they should) out of the examination, rather than being imposed upon it from the outset, as a 'given'.

I find it interesting that three of the contributors to this issue have strong connections (whatever their actual current positions) to the criticism of F.R. Leavis: Tony French and I attended Leavis's lectures regularly at Cambridge, and Garry Watson is the author of a book (brilliant and riveting — I literally 'couldn't put it down'), *The Leavises, the 'Social', and the 'Left'*. I would recommend it to anyone wishing to write serious and responsible criticism, though they will find it (if at all) only with great difficulty: since a part of its purpose was the unanswerable demolition of the pretensions of virtually the entire literary-critical establishment of the time, it was rejected by every 'respectable' publishing house and eventually brought out, in 1977, by a small alternative British press (Brynmill). I suppose it might still be possible to track down copies through the library system. Professor Watson sent me, on request, one of his last remaining copies, and it has had a stimulating and salutary effect on me personally: I have always tried to be faithful to Leavisian principle 'in my fashion', but I also recognize how far I have fallen short.

Criticism, it seems to me, has suffered disastrously from its premature and unreflecting abandonment of Leavis in the 1970s, and it is time his influence became once again a decisive presence. The reinstatement presents of course extremely complex problems, but that is true of all figures from the past — true of Marx and Freud as much as of Leavis. The central problem will be to find ways of incorporating Leavisian principle in a new and revitalized Left, to give it the political dimension it always lacked (although it was always thoroughly 'political' in the wider sense). The saddest moment, for me, in Ian MacKillop's recent biography (*F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, published by Penguin, hence relatively easy to come by) is a remark reportedly made by Leavis in his late years about modern students: 'They're lost and unsupported. Prey, easy prey, to the committed political activists'. Today's students seem to me 'lost and unsupported' indeed; what Leavis never confronted was the possibility (now a clear certainty) that his ideals would never be realizable without radical political change.

Leavis was appalled in his lifetime by the decline of the University; today we see the end (?) of that process. Trying to protect some vestige of his ideal, Leavis protested repeatedly against other organizations of higher learning appropriating the title, and today there are still feeble protests from university academics when 'Colleges' or 'Polytechnics' apply for the right to call themselves universities. My own position today is the exact reverse: most of our present universities have long since forfeited any right to the title, and should rename themselves what they are, essentially career-training institutes. One of our Canadian universities is at least honest about this: it advertises itself on our subways as 'Real Education for the Real World', which of course translates as 'slotting you into the capitalist economy', as successfully and comfortably as possible. Would a new Left restore the ideal of the University as 'a creative centre of civilization'? Or does that very phrase no longer mean anything?

Robin Wood

Submissions are welcome for upcoming issues:

48. THE NEW WAVE IN CONTEXT

49. CLASS AND NATION IN CANADIAN CINEMA

50. CUKOR AND HITCHCOCK: CENTENARY

The Western, with its historical setting, its thematic emphasis on the establishment of law and order, and its resolution of the conflict between civilization and savagery on the frontier, is a kind of foundation ritual.
— John Cawelti (73)

THE WESTERN: The Genre that Engenders the Nation

by Garry Watson

I agree that the western is indeed a kind of foundation ritual but I think we will be better able to build on this insight once we realize that the conflict to which Cawelti refers — between civilization and savagery — is part of a larger crisis in legitimation that is best understood as being essentially sacrificial in nature. As I understand it, the western is the genre that typically dramatizes a sacrificial crisis, the violent resolution of which founds or refounds a community or nation.

So what exactly is a sacrificial crisis? I take the idea from René Girard, who defines it — in his book *Violence and the Sacred* — as being, in the last analysis, “a crisis of distinctions” (49). Such a crisis affects the entire cultural order and it coincides with the disappearance of the absolutely crucial difference “between impure violence and purifying violence.” What makes this particular distinction so important is the fact that, when it has been effaced, “purification is no longer possible and impure, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community.” In other words, “the distinction between the pure and the impure” is the “sacrificial distinction” *par excellence* and it “cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well” (Girard 49). But at the same time, the moment of complete social breakdown — when all the differences are obliterated and violent reciprocity or a state of lawlessness has spread throughout the whole community — is also the moment that can “trigger the mechanism of generative unanimity,” thus enabling the violence to focus on a surrogate victim whose murder — so long, at least, as the victim is not seen (accurately) as a merely arbitrary scapegoat — can restore “a social system based on multiple and sharply pronounced differences” (188).¹

1. In his later work, from *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* onwards, Girard argues that it is much more difficult for this to occur today than it used to be. How so? Mainly because of the long-term effects of the Christian revelation which, precisely to the degree that it exposes their workings to the light of day, makes all violent solutions unworkable. Our only remaining option is the non-violent and also — since “violence and the sacred are one and the same thing” (262) — non-sacred solution he associates with Christ. My own view is that we can and should disentangle the concept of the sacrificial crisis from the pro-Christian argument Girard wants it to serve. When I quote from Girard in this essay it is always from his *Violence and the Sacred*.



William Holden in *The Wild Bunch*



Now whatever else it is about, it would be difficult to deny that the western is indeed centrally concerned — and in a somewhat ritualistic manner — with the foundation of community. Think, for example, of such US flag-flying celebrations of the 4th of July as the dance of the homesteaders in *Shane* or the rifle-shooting contest in *Winchester 73*. Or how about the dedication of the first church of Tombstone in *My Darling Clementine*? Or the model town Vienna shows her lover in *Johnny Guitar*? Or the Mormons in pursuit of the promised land in *Wagonmaster*? Or the lesson in civics — with citations from the Declaration of Independence — given by Ransom Stoddard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*? Or the group that gradually gathers around Josey in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*? Obviously there is no shortage of examples that can help us to see what the western has in common with a Fourth of July ceremony. But on the other hand, what principally distinguishes it from the latter is the fact that it is the *kind* of ritual or ceremony that contains within itself an explanation — in the form of its staging a dramatic conflict that in some respects resembles Girard's sacrificial crisis — as to how the founding took place.

If the western "reaffirms the act of foundation" (Cawelti 73), it does so by identifying that act with the violence produced in the culminating moment when the hero stands firm and risks his life in a deadly shoot-out with the enemy. In a nutshell, the message the western insists on, over and over again, is that it is not, as Ranse would have it, "education," but rather the willingness of someone like Tom Doniphon to stand up to and then shoot someone like Liberty Valance that constitutes — in the words Ranse has written on the blackboard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* — "the basis of law and order." And also, therefore, the basis of the community in the process of emerging.

I am not suggesting that the Girardian model of the successfully resolved sacrificial crisis fits in every detail. For one thing the mechanism of generative unanimity is seldom triggered in the western and when it is its range is restricted — as we shall see later, in the case of *The Wild Bunch* — to that of the tightly-knit group (the group of professionals studied by Will Wright in his *Sixguns and Society* [1975]). The mob-like unanimity of the men led by Emma Small in *Johnny Guitar* is much more the kind of thing Girard has in mind, but it doesn't turn out to be generative. Yet the western does typically end up by staging an act of violence — or, to be more specific, a killing — that founds or restores a community on the basis of the various differences it simultaneously reconstitutes. In fact, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that almost the whole point of the western is to be found in the way in which it reenforces — or makes more sharply pronounced — certain differences.

But what about the difference between the pure and the impure? As I've already noted, this is clearly the key sacrificial distinction and yet, at first glance, the western might seem to have little interest in it. But the fact that the terms themselves — purity and impurity — are seldom used is deceptive. Consider, for example, what — after the concluding gun-fight — is most familiar. Many westerns begin with a shot of a wild

landscape out of which a figure on horseback can be perceived gradually emerging and coming towards us. There are many exceptions and countless variations but this is one of the basic patterns. What does it mean? Often, I would argue, it is best understood with reference to the situation Girard describes as "the Warrior's Return" (42). Since he is "still tainted with the slaughter of war," a "special sort of impurity clings to the warrior returning to his homeland" and there is the real risk of his "carrying the seed of violence into the very heart of his city" (41). Since the western hero is not usually a soldier, however (even though most westerns are significantly set in the decades following the Civil War), it may be more appropriate for us to think here of the figure on horseback we see coming out of the distance in *Shane*, rather than in *The Searchers*.

Shane

Though we never get to know very much about Shane's past, we do learn that he was once a gunfighter and this makes us realise — at least, in retrospect — that there is some doubt when we first encounter this stranger as to how he will behave. He may not be a warrior but he does carry the seed of violence within him and so the question is whether or not it will turn out to be a purifying violence.

"Any phenomenon linked to impure violence is capable," in Girard's view, "of being inverted and rendered beneficent" — even if, as he insists, "this can take place only within the immutable and rigorous framework of ritual practice" (58). My suggestion, then, is that the early scenes in which Shane is taken in by Joe and Marian Starrett and their son Joey — particularly the scenes in which he shares dinner with them and then works with Joe to remove the stump Joe has been trying on his own to remove for two years — function as purification rituals. And that Shane *needs* purifying or "decontaminating" (41) is made plain by just how trigger-happy he is — not only when the sound of Joey loading his gun with blanks makes him go for *his* gun out in the yard (an incident that occurs before it has been established that he is going to be a friend of Starrett rather than of Ryker) but also, and even more strikingly, when he is startled at the dinner table by the noise of a farm animal outside. There is a similar moment in *Johnny Guitar* when the former gunfighter responds to Turkey's attempt at demonstrating his manhood by going temporarily berserk. And one might also reflect in this context on Ethan Edwards and of the possibility of explaining his failure or refusal to enter into the family circle at the end of *The Searchers* in terms of his being still too contaminated by impure violence to do so — even if, on another level, he is of course notoriously committed to racial purity.

If we think of its effect on Dallas, the Doc and the Ringo Kid especially, then we might want to see the scene in which Lucy Mallory gives birth in *Stagecoach* as another example of a purification ritual. But then, images of purity (like the innocent look on young James Earp's face as his older brothers leave him to go into Tombstone in *My Darling Clementine*) and of impurity (like the one we don't literally see but are asked to imagine, of father and son blocking the well in *The Tall T*) are plentiful in westerns, and it's not just a matter of individual

images, or even of individual scenes. There is a sense in which entire westerns can be described as purification rituals. As quickly becomes apparent when we think of *Rio Bravo*, first of the image of impurity in the opening scene — when Dude gets down on his knees to retrieve a silver dollar from a spittoon — and then of that movie's ending — with Dude cleaned up and triumphant and singing about the river rolling along as he walks down the street with Stumpy (and the latter delightedly picks up Feathers' tights, which Chance has tossed out of the hotel window up above).

But if a sacrificial crisis is one involving the threatened loss of distinctions, then I now need to point to two things: (i) a western in which distinctions are under threat and (ii) some evidence of *other* distinctions in addition to the one we've been focussing on so far. No doubt the most obvious example is that of the conflict between the cattle ranchers and the homesteaders (or small ranchers, or townsfolk) that we find cropping up in such different westerns as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Ballad of Little Jo* and — most famously, no doubt — in *Shane*. So let's zero in on the latter, on the scene in which Ryker and his men are waiting at Starrett's place to greet the Starretts and Shane on their return from the Fourth of July festivities. Ryker (the cattle rancher) has come to offer Starrett (the homesteader) a job and here is the ensuing exchange:

STARRETT: You've made things pretty hard for us Ryker — and us in the right all the time.

RYKER: Right? *You* in the right? Look Starrett, when I come to this country you weren't much older than your boy here. We had rough times, me and the other men that are mostly dead now. I got a bad



Shane: Shane and Starret (Van Heflin) remove the tree stump; (below) with Joey (Brandon de Wilde).



shoulder yet from a Cheyenne arrowhead. We made this country. Found it and we made it. With blood and empty bellies. The cattle we brought in were hazed off by Indians and rustlers. It didn't bother you much anymore because we handled them. We made a safe range out of this. Some of us died doing it. We made it. And then people moved in and never had a raw hide like in the old days. Fence off my range and fence me off from water. Some of 'em like you plough ditches and take out irrigation and water. And so the creek turns dry sometimes. I've got to move my stock because of it. And you say we have no right to the range. The men that did the work and ran the risks have no right? I take you for a fair man Starrett.

As the white-bearded, patriarchal Ryker delivers this speech, his dignity is enhanced and his already-strong case strengthened further by Stevens's decision to photograph him from below, his upper body on horseback silhouetted against the grandeur of the night sky. It's true, as Starrett goes on to say, that Ryker "didn't *find* this country. There was," as Starrett tells him, "trappers here and Indian traders long before you showed up. And they tamed this country more than you did." But Ryker has not exactly denied this. And when Starrett continues by chastising Ryker for "talk[ing] about rights" — "You think you've got the right to say that nobody else has any. Well, that ain't the way the government looks at it" — he seems to have forgotten that *he* was the one to bring this subject up, not Ryker.

So all in all, if the question is Who is morally in the right? the answer — on the basis of this exchange — is not obvious. While we are left in no doubt elsewhere in the film that Ryker, the cattle rancher, is the bad guy and Starrett, the homesteader, the good guy, here, at least, the key distinction — between who is in the right, who in the wrong — is up for grabs. We oughtn't to be too surprised, therefore, to find the two sides each trying to brand the other with the charge of impurity. As, for example, when Chris first tries to provoke a fight with Shane in Grafton's store. "I thought," he remarks (after becoming aware of the presence of homesteaders buying goods in the room next to the saloon area), "I smelled pigs." "Will," he appeals to the bartender, "let's keep the smell of pigs out from where we're drinking." And then, after Shane has entered the saloon and Chris has thrown his drink over him ("have some of this and smell like a man"), one of Chris's friends comments that he has just "fumigated a sodbuster." Predictably, then, when Ryker insults both Shane and Marian by insinuating that there is something sexual between them ("Pretty wife Starrett has"), Shane responds by calling him — in clear if not necessarily conscious imitation of the language in which he has earlier been insulted by Chris — a "dirty, stinking old man." And, in a similar vein, when the conflict escalates later on, we find Stark Wilson forcing Torrey to go for his gun by calling him "Southern trash."

The fact that Torrey dies face down in thick mud is also significant in this context and it might well remind us of young James Earp lying dead in a puddle of rain (in *My Darling Clementine*) or of Angel being dragged through the dirt and dust (in *The Wild Bunch*).² The point, however, is that in each

of these cases an outrage has been perpetrated. Innocence has been besmirched and degraded and we cry out in indignation, demanding that those who have committed these foul deeds get their just deserts. As Wilson and Ryker eventually get theirs, for example. But why does Shane also have to die? Or does he? Why the uncertainty? And why does Shane have to leave at the end?

According to Girard, communities grow "out of the body of an original victim" (306), a victim who was first regarded by its murderers as accursed but who is later regarded by the community grateful for the peace his death has brought to them as being beneficent. For Girard, this transformation over time of a scapegoated victim into a god is what explains the ambiguous (accursed/beneficent) nature of the sacred. And I would suggest that it provides us with the best answers we are likely to find to the two main questions — Why does the hero leave? Why does he have to die? — we are left with at the end of *Shane*.

Having become too "dirty" or impure to stay, Shane needs to disappear into the wilderness so that he can be cleansed or purified. I'm thinking here of the point Shane is making when he explains to Joey at the end that there is "no living with a killing," "there's no going back," if only because "right or wrong, it's a brand, and a brand sticks." What is this "brand" if not the sort of stigma or taint of impurity that risks sticking not only to the one who carries it but also to those with whom he (or she) comes into contact?

The reason Shane has to die is so that the community being born can be felt to grow out of *him*, or *his* body, rather than — as is of course the case in many westerns — out of his (the hero's) killing of a victim we don't care about. Of course, by no means all western heroes do die but it may be that the films made about those who do — *Shane*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *The Wild Bunch* and *The Ballad of Little Jo*, to name just four of them — have a special resonance. But why the uncertainty as to whether or not Shane is actually going to die? By leaving as he does, Shane makes it easier for us to believe that perhaps, against all odds, he *didn't* die, that perhaps, in some sense, he lives on. As we are clearly meant to feel he does, if only in the form of the community his death has given birth to.

When Shane rides off at the end and Joey calls out after him, the latter's words — "Shane" and "Come back" — echo. And it seems to me that when Shane's name fills the valley it creates the effect of a kind of generative unanimity, of an emerging community of little Joeys, all of whom speak with one voice and are formed in the image of its founder. If we recall Shane's last words of advice to Joey — that he return home to grow up "strong and straight," to tell his



mother there are no more guns in the valley and to take care of both his parents — we then realize that this community of sons has been entrusted with the task of protecting the wider community of families. If we ask, furthermore, how the protecting is going to get done, the answer, presumably, given the nature of the founding figure, is with guns. So that a double and contradictory message is being conveyed: the two-tiered community in the process of being born is both peaceful and, simultaneously (in Richard Slotkin's phrase), a Gunfighter Nation.

The point, however, that is unequivocally made by the ending of *Shane* is that the gunfighters destined to protect *this* nation will be on the side of the straight and clean rather than the crooked and dirty. We are left in no doubt but that they will be devoted to the defence of civilization or law and order, and to the defeat of savagery or lawlessness. All of which obviously makes them very different from the gunfighters we encounter in *The Wild Bunch* and raises the question as to how the ideas we've been exploring apply to what is surely the greatest of all western movies.

The Wild Bunch

If, as Paul Seydor claims in his extraordinarily rich and helpful essay on Peckinpah's masterpiece, the conventional western can largely be characterized in terms of its insistence on providing "an overlay of good versus evil that is somehow sup-

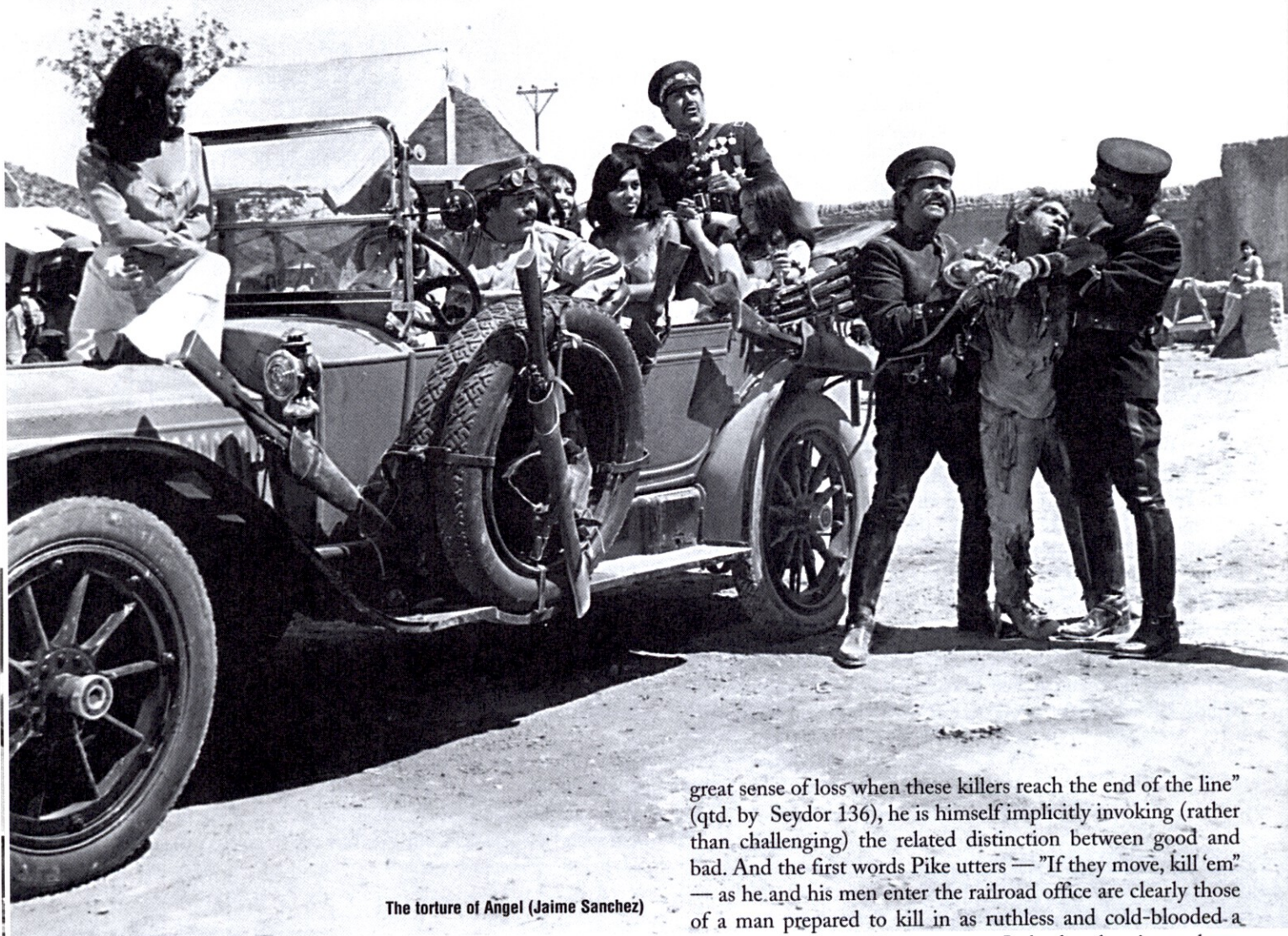
posed to legitimate the appetite for violence that it whets" (188), then perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about *The Wild Bunch* is how unconventional it is. Not only does it fail to provide this specific kind of "overlay" (with, for example, the fight between the Bunch and the Mapachistas taking place without reference to the Villistas, who might admittedly be thought to embody goodness); the distinction between good and evil virtually dissolves during the astonishing opening sequence in which soldiers are really outlaws in disguise, the law is represented by scavenging bounty hunters, innocent-looking children torture a scorpion with killer ants and we find ourselves wondering if we are not entering into a similar universe to the one Gloucester unforgettably evokes when he claims, at the opening of the fourth act of *King Lear*, that our relationship "to th' gods" is like that of "flies to wanton boys .../They kill us for their sport."

It's true that when Peckinpah himself professes to find it "strange" — in view of the fact that he "was trying to tell a simple story about bad men in changing times" — that we "feel a

2. Of course in *High Noon* it is the sheriff's badge that gets contemptuously tossed into the dusty street, just as, in *High Noon*, the civics lesson ends with the US flag being taken down by the run-away judge. It has to be said, therefore, that unless we take it to be represented by the departing sheriff and his wife (and the youngster who brings them their wagon), in *High Noon* the community is *not* reborn. Hence, in part, no doubt, the need Hawks felt to remind us of the job the western is *supposed* to be performing in his inspired and still inspiring *Rio Bravo*.

The Wild Bunch





The torture of Angel (Jaime Sanchez)

great sense of loss when these killers reach the end of the line" (qtd. by Seydor 136), he is himself implicitly invoking (rather than challenging) the related distinction between good and bad. And the first words Pike utters — "If they move, kill 'em" — as he and his men enter the railroad office are clearly those of a man prepared to kill in as ruthless and cold-blooded a manner as seems to him necessary. Indeed, only minutes later, he proves as much when he violently shoves a frightened railroad official out into the street to draw some of the gunfire intended by the hidden bounty-hunters for the bunch, thus allowing the latter the opportunity to take advantage of the momentary confusion when, seconds later, they are in the thick of the fray themselves. These are obviously the words and actions of a man who will let nothing get in the way of what he wants. Nevertheless, while few of us would, in other circumstances, have any hesitation in calling such a man bad or evil, in *these* circumstances the terms don't seem to apply. Not, at any rate, as we ordinarily understand them.

Why is this? Partly because it is the obnoxious Harrigan who represents and enforces the law — with the help of the kind of men whom their leader, the ex-member of the bunch, Thornton, aptly describes later on as "gutter trash" — while Christianity is embodied in the first laughable and then (as they get caught in the crossfire) pathetic South Texas Temperance Union. But mainly because we are being implicitly asked to judge Pike and his men by a different set of criteria, those we associate with the tradition of the epic. It is a matter of the sort of warrior virtues Alasdair MacIntyre describes in his book *After Virtue* (1981), as, for example, in



The aftermath of holocaust: Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan)

those heroic societies celebrated by Homer, rather than the kind we find in Aristotle or the Bible.

In other words, even though Pike and his men are not *really* soldiers or warriors, Peckinpah's film implicitly asks us to treat them as if they were. Which is disturbing, to say the least. So that while, for example, we can't help noticing how viciously Crazy Lee behaves towards the three hostages he is left to guard — and how the river in the hymn ("Yes, we'll gather at the river") he forces them to sing (in a nightmarish reminder of the very different uses that hymn is put to in Ford's films) has become a river of blood — the emphasis falls *not so much* on this (or on the presumably obscene words he speaks into the ear of the woman hostage) as on his bravery and (to adapt what Dutch says about Angel later on) his willingness, for the benefit of the group, to play "his string right out to the end." After (or along with) courage, loyalty to the group is probably the virtue that counts most, as Pike reminds Lyle and Tector when (having earlier shown their inclination to treat Angel as a second-class group member) they turn on Sykes:

You're not getting rid of anybody. We're going to stick together, just like it used to be. When you side with a man you stay with him and if you can't do that you're like some animal. You're finished. We're finished!

This furnishes one of the main criteria by which Pike implicitly asks to be judged and by which, on a number of occasions, the film does judge him. As, for example, when he is forced to realize, moments after he has come out with this articulation of his code, that he himself has forgotten all about Sykes's grandson, Crazy Lee, and, in effect, abandoned him to his death. Or, again, in the flashback that shows how he managed to escape when (his, at that time, comrade) Thornton got caught. On these two occasions Pike is found wanting whereas we are surely meant to feel that his decision, in the aftermath of the opening robbery, to execute his blinded comrade is necessary to the survival of the rest of the group. Which doesn't make it any the less disturbing. But think, for an example taken from a very different work, first of the King's reaction to the "bloody" Captain's account of Macbeth's bravery — as "he unseamed [the rebel Macdonwald] from the nave to th' chops/And fixed his head upon our battlements" (*Macbeth* 1.ii. 1, 22-23) — at the beginning of Shakespeare's tragedy: "O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!" (1.ii.24). And then, after Macbeth's own head has been cut off, of the new King's description of him as a "butcher" (V.viii. 69) at the end. Behaviour that can seem admirable in war can seem monstrous out of it. And if, as I am arguing, we are indeed intended to judge Pike and his men by the standards of wartime — even when they are behaving as outlaws — this means that we must be ready to see Pike's willingness to perform this act of execution as being both monstrous *and* admirable at the same time.

As Girard sees it, "men are only capable of reconciling their differences at the expense of a third party" (259). And judging by the scene in which (having just succeeded in stealing the ammunition from the troop train) the bunch relax by passing around a bottle of liquor, ensuring that it is all drunk by the

time it gets to Lyle, I would say that this is Peckinpah's view too. Group solidarity is always based on various kinds of exclusion or opposition, sometimes comic, as when the would-be excluder Lyle gets some of his own medicine, and sometimes deadly serious, as when the bunch go up against Mapache and his men at the end.

This latter is of course the one scene the western can't do without: the shoot-out. But what makes this particular shoot-out so distinctive is the difficulty we have separating the protagonists in terms of right and wrong. It isn't that there is *no* difference. When Dutch says that the Bunch are nothing like Mapache because they don't hang anybody he has a point. Unlike Mapache and his cohorts, the Bunch do not take pleasure in inflicting pain: their killings may be cruel but they are not sadistic. Still, Dutch exaggerates: it's simply not true to say that the Bunch are "*nothing* like Mapache." After all, if the Mapachistas are certainly represented as being the enemies of their fellow countrymen and women (whose true interests are defended by the Villistas), for their part, Pike and his men show no hesitation when asked to steal from their own government and to act as traitors to their own country. And while Mapache's behaviour towards Angel — first dragging him behind his car through the dirt and then cutting his throat — is contemptible (and no less horrific than the spectacle it obviously resembles, that of Hector being tortured in *The Iliad*), Angel himself is not quite as angelic as he sometimes appears. As we see, for example, when he shoots his former lover Teresa. It may be his pure-mindedness that prompts him to do this but if so then it has to be said that being pure-minded is not necessarily the same as being angelic.

Here, however, what seems to me to need stressing is Peckinpah's "imaginative impartiality," the kind of even-handed treatment that, as Seydor nicely puts it, "cannot help granting even the vilest characters a full measure of the rich, pulsating vitality that animates every frame of the film" (178). He makes sure, for example, that, on the one hand, we see how fearless Mapache can be — as when, in the midst of gunfire, he behaves towards an admiring youngster who handles him a cablegram as if he has all the time in the world; while, on the other, he takes care "to ironize Thornton's description of Pike as 'the best'" (Seydor 162), especially in those flashbacks that show his mistakes, miscalculations or equivocations.

As Seydor rightly insists, however, Peckinpah's ironies are not intended to debunk the Western, nor even to call into question "the idea of regeneration through violence." On the contrary, in fact, they are meant "to tighten the screws of the struggle, to make our assent more difficult, indeed, almost impossible, so that when the release comes and the heroic ideal is reclaimed in all its savage beauty and terror, it really is more miraculous than we had ever dreamed or imagined" (210).

But this only partially explains why we feel such release. "Let's go," says Pike and that's *all* he says. For that matter, it's just about all Wyatt Earp says as he and his brothers (and Doc Halliday) set out to meet the Clantons at the end of *My Darling Clementine*. So why do we find the spectacle of Pike, Lyle, Tector and Dutch setting off at the end of *The Wild Bunch* so much more moving and exhilarating than the earlier

scene from Ford's film?³ Partly, no doubt, we are stirred by the martial music that accompanies them; there is no music on the soundtrack as the Earp brothers walk to meet the Clantons. But over and above this is the fact that, while the Earps and Clantons are fairly even matched, the Bunch face such overwhelming odds — very much, I would say, like Coriolanus, when he leaves his army to follow his enemies inside the gates of Corioles, which then close behind him — that it makes sense to speak, as Seydor does, of their exhibiting “a suicidal passion for glory” (188). Suicidal or, at least, self-sacrificing. Small wonder, then, if we hear in Pike's utterance (but not, even though the words are the same, in Wyatt's) more or less what D.H. Lawrence once detected in what he referred to as the “[s]plendid word” — “‘Andiamo!’ — let us go” (202) — *he* heard uttered during a marionette show in Palermo:

Is there not the massive, brilliant, outflinging recklessness in the male soul, summed up in the sudden word: *Andiamo!* Andiamo! Let us go on. Andiamo! — let us go hell knows where, but let us go on. The splendid recklessness and passion that knows no precept and no school-teacher, whose very molten spontaneity is its own guide. (203)

After all, even if Pike and his men clearly do recognize *one* moral precept (loyalty, the obligation to stick together, to go back for Angel), what moves us so deeply is their lack of any kind of calculation as to what their action might reasonably accomplish; it is precisely, in other words, the splendid *recklessness* of their passionate and spontaneous commitment to a path of action almost certain to result in their own deaths.

In effect, if we recall the movie's opening scene, it is as if the Bunch voluntarily place themselves in the end in the position of “the scorpions on the anthill of *fédérale* soldiers” (Seydor 196), knowing full well — on some level, at least — that both the scorpions and the ants were consumed by flames, burnt alive. And for what? Other, that is to say, than glory, the point about which is that, as Falstaff famously pointed out, strictly speaking, it is useless. As useless, say, as beauty, the “terrible beauty” that is engendered just as surely by the final act of the Bunch as it is by the act of “MacDonagh and MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse” in Yeats's “Easter 1916.” What, we can therefore say, the Bunch commit themselves to is the kind of “expenditure” Georges Bataille claimed humanity (recognizing only “the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally”) tends to exclude in principle: the useless, nonproductive or unconditional kind of expenditure that involves great losses or spectacular destruction or sacrifices and that tends toward the “generous, orgiastic, and excessive” (“The Notion” 117, 118, 119, 124).

It seems appropriate to turn to Bataille at this point because, like Yeats (however reluctantly) and Peckinpah, he too *celebrates* this form of “expenditure,” celebrates it, it's worth noting, as the kind of sacrificial consumption we associate with death by burning. In this Bataille differs from Girard, who encourages us to reject the phenomenon Yeats is referring to when he speaks of the birth of a “terrible beauty.” Both Bataille and Girard agree, however, that what is at stake is the sacred,

which they both understand as a contradictory, double-sided phenomenon, on the one side blessed, beautiful, pure and peaceful, on the other accursed, terrible, impure and violent. Hence, for example (with laughter, according to Bataille, being the key to “the enigma” of sacrifice, “the shared joy of laughter” representing “sacred communication” [“Sacrifice” 68]), our uneasy sense that the laughter we hear echoing throughout *The Wild Bunch* can turn at any moment from the one side of the sacred to the other. Right up to the ending, at any rate, when the successful resolution of the sacrificial crisis engenders the nucleus of a new community and a process of purification takes place as the sacred shows — for a while at least — only the more positive side of its face.

First Sykes invites Thornton to join him and the Villistas and as Thornton agrees to do so the two break out into laughter, which then gets amplified by the laughter of Pike, Dutch, Lyle and Tector, and Angel who we now see resurrected at their best as they emerged days earlier from Angel's village. Positioned in a green and festive world, the Bunch are caught in a light — the kind we sometimes catch glimpses of in other westerns (as, for example, at the beginning and end of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*) — that unmistakably cleanses and purifies them. As a result of which their villainy is sloughed off and they are effectively reborn.

Those who assume that nationalism is always reactionary will have an especially hard time with the ending of *The Wild Bunch* and also, if they open themselves to its challenge, with the western in general. If the western is a genre that engenders the nation it does so in a variety of forms, as in their different ways the meeting between Josey and the Comanche leader Ten Bears (in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*), the laughter of Mary's mother at the end of *The Ballad of Little Jo* and (in *The Wild Bunch*) the final identification of the Bunch with Angel's people — both the villagers and the revolutionary Villistas — all make clear.

Garry Watson teaches in the Department of English, University of Alberta.

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3. As Seydor says, “[w]hen the Bunch strap on their guns and begin their march through the crowded streets of Agua Verde, they are reenacting a Western convention that is so generic it seems to dissolve into ritual before our very eyes” (208). In *The Wild Bunch: An Album in Montage* (1997), the movie Seydor put together from footage shot on the set of *The Wild Bunch*, we see how the idea for this magnificent scene occurred to Peckinpah at the last moment, in front of the cameras.

“As the record of a cultural illusion, *The Birth of a Nation* is without equal.”¹

by **Tony French**

The United States Cavalry — unlike the K.G.B., the I.R.A., the S.S. or the Ku Klux Klan — has never, so far as I know, been described as a criminal conspiracy. It's always occupied, except perhaps among the intelligentsia, in the radicals and other such undesirables, a cherished and indeed inviolable place in the pantheon of heroic American institutions, along with the Marines, the Minutemen, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. When in the 1920s steeds were replaced by tanks, the Cavalry gave way gracefully, was retired to the museum of Military History, and stuffed. Films (not only Hollywood films, of course) have always been repositories of historic myths, fables, legends and other grotesque untruths, amusingly crucified in the recent *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*², an exposure so savage that it almost convinces one of the basic untrustworthiness of the commercial Hollywood film as a medium for *any* serious treatment of the past. Had the book paid more than cursory attention to non-American films — especially those from Britain and Russia — its implied verdict would probably have been even more damning.

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1. Everett Carter, “The Significance of *The Birth of a Nation*,” from *American Quarterly*, 12 (Fall 1960), 347-357; reprinted in Fred Silva (ed.), *Focus on “The Birth of a Nation,”* New Jersey 1971 (Spectrum, Books), p. 139.
2. ed. Mark C. Carnes, Henry Holt, 1995.

BURY MY HEART AT *Fort Apache*

**Fort Apache: publicity still.
John Wayne, Henry Fonda,
Shirley Temple, John Agar**





Henry Fonda as
Colonel Thursday

John Ford's "Cavalry 'Trilogy'" (of which only *Fort Apache*, in my view its least unsatisfactory section, is discussed in *Past Imperfect*) may well make us wonder, fifty years later, at what point filmic "History" becomes so distorted as to cry out for the kind of total suppression which has been visited on Nazi propaganda films such as *S.A. Mann Brandt*, *Hitlerjunge Quex*, and *Jud Süß*, or, till quite recently, on *Der Triumph des Willens*.

I am well aware that Ford may quite possibly not have designed the three films — *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950) — as a trilogy at all, at least in the strict sense: unlike, say, Donskoi's *Gorki* films. John Wayne appears as Kirby York in the first and third, but in the second (which is in Technicolor) he plays Nathan Brittles, a character who has a different history, including a different marital history. Nevertheless, I am encouraged to treat them as (so to say) a threesome by the thought that what I am going to argue would largely stand (or fall) even if they had been conceived quite separately. For my argument will be that as we pass from one film to another, the really uncomfortable though unstable insights of the first one give way to an increasingly sentimental and self-indulgent view of The Cavalry and the ideology it represents until, by the end of the third film in the sequence, Ford has patently ensconced himself in attitudes that he was analysing and rejecting in the first, the overall effect being a sort of *trahison de clercs*. I suspect that the change may be related to the increasingly repressive political atmosphere of the United States between 1948 and 1950, when the Cold War with its concomitant anti-Communism and mindless pro-"Americanism" were on the alarmingly rapid increase. But that is highly speculative. Perhaps politics and the creative arts are seldom related to one another in this one-to-one fashion.

I've said that *Fort Apache* is in my opinion by far the best

of the films. It is, at the lowest level, simply better-organized than its successors, and the tauter structure goes with — arises from — cooler and more searching attitudes both towards the cavalry and towards their foes, the "Indians." It is the only film of the three to make any real suggestion that the latter are people too, and that their depredations are not entirely a matter of the kind of subhuman wickedness attributed, in German films of the time, to Jews, in Russian films to Czarist officers, priests, kulaks, and so on — an innate and inexplicable bestiality with which, in other American films of the time, almost all "natives," of whatever pigmentation, are credited when they are not dismissed as quaintly humorous oddities. In *Fort Apache*, the suggestion is actually made that the "Indians" have legitimate grievances against their exploiters and that a good deal of the trouble is being caused by venal "Indian agents" sent by Washington, who give their charges short measure and fill them up with rot-gut whisky. Similarly, the film's glorification of the United States Cavalry is heavily qualified by the (perfectly reasonable) suggestion that at any rate some of its members are using it for personal advancement, which may — and in fact does — involve an unscrupulous betrayal of the very trust they are supposed to be protecting. What is more, the presentation of a certain kind of soldier goes inseparably with a striking insight into a certain sort of authoritarian personality, presented without either glamorization or mere contempt. And the film closes with an ironic reflection on the way in which a glory-seeking and very unlikeable martinet gets turned, by the natural processes of journalistic publicity, into the very model of a modern major-general on the lines of Douglas MacArthur or Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf. All of which makes the lack of any such insights in the two later films the more dismaying and incomprehensible.

I shall try to give some particular force to these general thoughts. It must be said that the brief opening sequences of *Fort Apache* do not seem very promising: "It's all too easy" is my reaction to the basic contrasts set up at the very beginning: the contrast, first, between the silhouette of the lone bugler and the sinister troops of "Indians"; between the bright diatonic tune from the bugle with its military backing, and the sullenly chromatic "Indian" music; between the reassuring power of the cavalry riding towards us, guidons a-flutter, and the massed "Indians" also riding threateningly towards us, with their war-lances at the ready; and between the formalized festive gregariousness of the NCO's ball at the Fort (actually a flashforward to much later in the film), and the non-human, inhuman, "otherness" of the buttes in Monument Valley, of which the "Indians" seem a natural product, inimical to the pioneering civilization suggested by that frail and vulnerable method that white men use of keeping in touch with one another — the stage-coach with its six horses and two coachmen on the box, which now enters our view and turns out, as we cut to a close-up, to be carrying the new commandant, Owen Thursday/Henry Fonda (with his daughter Philadelphia/Shirley Temple) to his new and bitterly disappointing command at Fort Apache.

"Too easy" would certainly be the right judgment if the

two pairs of antinomies were maintained with this degree of straightforward simplicity throughout the film — which, as I've intimated, I think they are in the other two films. But in *Fort Apache* the case is not so simple. Thursday contemptuously recites the names of the places they've passed through, with the summarizing "What a country!" as the hard lines of his face visibly set into a sort of embittered narcissism (Henry Fonda is beyond praise in the role); and he snubs his daughter, but immediately retracts and apologizes. Evidently, then, the presentation of The United States Cavalry, and of the War Department behind it, isn't going to be nearly as simple as the opening moments have suggested: there is a good deal of "savage" disharmony in Thursday, too — an impression confirmed when he and Philadelphia arrive at the little inn where they are supposed to find a gig to take them to the fort. His stiff-legged gait, the arrogant carriage of his head, his unnaturally wide-open eyes constantly swivelling on the lookout for an insult, his unconcealed disgust at the coach-driver's scoring a bullseye in the cuspidor, and his barely civil behaviour to the drivers and the old landlady, economically foreshadow the personality that really erupts when the young lieutenant, Mickey O'Rourke/John Agar, emerges from the wash-house and is cuttingly told off (Thursday's "Mister" sounds like a whiplash) for being improperly dressed and, in effect, for not being a member of the welcoming party, with appropriate transport, that Thursday sees as his due. His cold formality contrasts, in the usual broad Ford way, with the warmth of the NCOs who have come from the Fort to collect Mickey: they give an admonition, too, but it's a smack-bottom, witnessed by Philadelphia with mirth not unmixed with excitement ("Wonderful!") — at least, one presumes that is the intention, but Shirley Temple is, even as a fetching teenager, so catastrophically demure as almost to fall into the Mrs Miniver class in her incapacity to register desire, though fortunately for her it's not the resoundingly empty sonorities of Walter Pidgeon that she has to pretend interest in. Thursday/Fonda, however, convincingly enacts paternal/sexual jealousy, combining it with an anti-Irish contempt (perhaps deliberately, he calls O'Rourke "O'Brien") which is doubtless part of his general racist bias, his self-contempt being, in an only too familiar way, projected onto others. And, when they get to Fort Apache and unexpectedly intrude into the ball, this cutting snub of Collingwood, apparently an old comrade-in-arms, fits harmoniously into the general picture: his behaviour to Collingwood not merely shocks, but even bewilders, the men and women in the mess-hall who are celebrating, it turns out, the birthday not of some ordinary mortal but, as Captain York/John Wayne respectfully tells him, of George Washington. Thursday is irritated that he can't very well object, though one feels that York has not exactly ingratiated himself with his new C.O. Philadelphia seizes the opportunity to join in the dance, the music being — appropriately? — "There's no place like home."

"Home" and the civilization thereof are then given substance by several sequences: first, one set that same evening, in which young O'Rourke visits his parents' humble but comfortable and much-lived-in quarters on the post and the three

show a kind of family love that is strikingly more spontaneous and unmanipulative than we've seen Thursday offer his daughter. Then, when Philadelphia wakes up next morning, as the Stars and Stripes climb the Fort's flagpole to the bugle's and drums' reveille and the bustle of mustering soldiers and their mounts, she has a pish-tushingly silly encounter with young O'Rourke (the love-interest in this film is roughly at the level of Andy Hardy): the point — or intended point — of the episode being, in all the fuss about calling-cards, to suggest that the amenities are observed even in this God-forsaken outpost, which thus becomes an outpost of "home" and civilization as well as of military power — indeed, the former are dependent on the latter.

But the episode that immediately follows, where Thursday savages his officers for being "improperly" dressed, suggests that defending civilization with its calling-cards and settled homes (contrasted throughout with the Redskins' wigwams) can degenerate into mere pedantic routine enforced with something approaching a Queeg-like obsessiveness, especially when Thursday makes it clear that he wants to make his troops the best in the army so as to gain "glory... advancement" by keeping the "Indians" down. His ambitions for his soldiers are amusingly burlesqued in a later sequence where first O'Rourke and then the sergeants try to lick some ludicrously unpromising recruits into shape, although of course we must remember that it is from material such as this that fine soldiers will be fashioned who will protect civilization and keep the savages in their place.

And the sequences that follow show his daughter (to the accompaniment of abysmally sprightly music, alas) dealing with depressingly unhomelike quarters by calling on the post's army wives for help. They set her up with various pieces of furniture, curtains, even a Mexican cook, so that when Thursday comes home for dinner a wintry smile briefly unfreezes his face, at least until his dignity is compromised by a chair that collapses under him (a point crudely underlined by the extra-diegetic music, which here seems to have wandered in from an Abbott and Costello enterprise).

It is not till the next couple of sequences, perhaps, that we start having our doubts about the beginning of the film confirmed: surely all this cosy charm is a frail talisman at best, especially in the scenes of camp life, with dinner between the *jeune premier* and his gal accompanied by "Genevieve" sung by an enchanting Irish tenor, together with all that stuff about the Fort's engagingly bluff old doctor and his whisky secreted in the O'Rourkes' armchair ... what, one asks has happened to the supposed complexity and astringency of attitude? The next few scenes, embodying the discovery of the young "lovers" of two American troopers roasted alive across wagon-wheels by the "Indians" and the taking-in of the bodies with the Cavalry coming to the rescue at the last minute (all accompanied by music that suggests Gustav Mahler after a pre-frontal lobotomy) confirm that the film looks so much less sure of its direction than one had imagined that one is left unconvinced by the next series of scenes with the hideous Christian "agent" Meacham (a poor actor into the bargain), who has been furnishing the "Indians" with Winchesters and

inflaming them with spirits. These scenes might seem to be entering a few items on the "Indians" side of the account, were it not for the cloddish behaviour of Sergeant Mulcahy/Victor McLaglen, who assays and unconvincingly pretends not to like the agent's literally inflammable whisky (when Indians get drunk, it's beastly; when Irishmen do, it's folksy-funny). And despite the fact that the episodes include a scorching denunciation of the ways in which interested parties in Washington are breaking their treaties and deliberately thinning out the "Indians," and the discovery that cases of supposed Bibles are really cases of filthy whisky (which of course the sergeants enjoy without their getting anything worse than a hangover), they somehow have so little effect that one perhaps feels that the film's balance is tipping.

Yet the film now tips back the other way — perhaps its instability is its glory. Col. Thursday shows up appallingly at the O'Rourke's dinner, with his snobbery about his daughter's marrying the son of a mere Sergeant-Major (who nevertheless has the Congressional Medal of Honor), and again at the NCOs' ball, a typical Ford dance scene which, in the context of highly formalized, indeed ritualized, human behaviour, makes precise physical/moral discriminations about people, Thursday being shown as brooding, apart, embarrassed, and as graceless in body as in moral character. His dance with O'Rourke's comely wife invents some of the great comic body-language of film, prophetic perhaps of M. Hulot, but more immediately, in the Hollywood context, recalling some of Stan Laurel's more bizarre inventions, notably the Scottish garbage-disposal dance in *Sons of the Desert*. Thursday's physical barbarity leads neatly up to his denunciation of Cochise (the Indian chief) as being a "breech-clouted savage ... an illiterate uncivilized murderer," and to his order to York and the rest to break York's promise and massacre the savage and his braves.

As we watch the Cavalry riding magnificently out to ambush and destroy Cochise and his Apaches, we may very well wince away from the grinding dissonance between the heroic images and our knowledge that, as Captain York has made abundantly clear, Thursday and his bugling troopers are engaged in a piece of chicanery which, from the Colonel's own point of view, one would expect to find not among blue-coats but among "breech-clouted savages." The whole affair is a sickening betrayal of the very values the Cavalry are supposed to embody and exemplify for the "Indians." If Meacham gave them whisky instead of bibles, Thursday is giving them deceit instead of honor. The ironic point is underlined by the anxiety of the women silhouetted against the sky, and by the men's lusty singing of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

It is surprising to find anything so subversive in a film made at a time when H.U.A.C. was active in Hollywood and investigating the "Hollywood Ten," and when anything that smacked even faintly of "unAmerican activities" was enough to get a writer or director grilled and blacklisted or even jailed. And Ford has more surprises in store. Col. Thursday treats Cochise rudely, sitting down to pow-wow with him; and the "Indian" chief himself is given a speech of great

cogency and dignity about the treatment of his people by the whites. In fact the film now seems to be not merely confirming its original insights about Thursday but also extending them to cover the entire military system of which he is a part — indeed, Cochise is so much the Noble Savage that one begins to wonder whether Thursday's stereotype hasn't simply been turned inside out (a danger that always lies in wait for anti-racists). And amazingly, when the Cavalry finally start what York has already warned Thursday and us is a desperate and stupid charge, it's they and not the "Indians" who give vent to savage war-whoops, thus confirming our impression that, anyway under Thursday's command, they've become little better than "savages" themselves, who thoroughly deserve what they're going to get.

The strains inherent in making such a film at such a time — perhaps at any time, given normal patriotic assumptions about one's army — come out most strikingly in the brief epilogue, which is set some years later (Mickey and Philadelphia have married and have a little boy, no doubt himself destined to become a soldier blue). York, now the Colonel in command at Fort Apache, is meeting some journalists gathered in his office, who are questioning him about the late Col. Thursday and making predictable comments about his bravery and greatness, savagely ironic for us who know about the way in which his unquenchable thirst for "glory" led him into the depths of treachery and many of his men to their deaths. Col. York glances at the portrait of Thursday hanging on the wall and looks away wryly with an expression that is worth a thousand words. If the film had ended at this point, all would have been well, in its astringent if simple fashion. But no: in reply to a journalist's comments that the dead other than Thursday are being forgotten, York turns on him and insists that they're "not forgotten, because they never died," arguing that though individuals may come and go, the Army goes on for ever and in that sense is undying. What's more, he adds, today's soldiers are "better men than they used to be": Thursday saw to that, making this Command one to be proud of. The wry expression has vanished from his face, and as the camera shows us grand images of the U.S. Cavalry, the manly voices and the martial music swell and the film comes to an end, or rather, perhaps, just stops dead in its tracks, as if transfixed by a perfectly-aimed arrow. We are left to make the best we can of this staggering turnabout, which reduces to complete nonsense much (though not all) that we have been seeing for the previous two hours and seven minutes. On internal evidence alone, one would conjecture that Ford had tacked on the last few moments as an afterthought, the film's logic dictating, one would have supposed, that it should end somewhat like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, with a bitter comment on the power of legend not merely to bend the truth a little but in fact to rotate it through one hundred and eighty degrees.

Then, as we look back on the film and ponder the criticism to which Thursday is unquestionably subjected, we may begin to wonder whether Ford's whole point hasn't all the time been that Thursday, far from merely taking certain military tendencies to excess, is in reality completely untypical of the noble organization of which he is regrettably a part. After



all, it was the War Department in Washington that relegated him to this obscure command despite his having distinguished himself in the recently-ended Civil War. The implication may very well be that the "Indian gang" in Washington have just got him out of the way (as in real life they probably did with Custer). Nor is Thursday without redeeming features — he sees through Meacham, for example; and in insisting on proper dress he is only enforcing Army regulations.

And the more one ponders the sorts of values that have grown up in the Fort — the values it is in a sense set up to spread and defend — the more one starts to worry about their extreme conventionality. I have been unkind about Shirley Temple's and John Agar's acting, but after all they are only doing what the script, and the film's whole ethos, requires. And again, do the values of "home" and civilization really amount to much more than the sentimental and utterly unexamined assertion that, when all's said and done, there *is* "no place like home"? It's no accident that the film goes Genevieve-squashy in the middle; really, it is pretty squashy all the way through, pursuing its sentimentalities with the relentlessness of Victor McLaglen pursuing his next hang-over. Whenever Ford cannot confront an issue (how do the raw recruits feel about killing "Indians," for instance, and

why?), he takes refuge in the kind of Irish humour that provoked the late James Agee into furiously commenting that he sometimes wished Cromwell had done a more thorough job in 1650 (see the entry under *Fort Apache* in Halliwell's Film Guide, 8th Edition).

I haven't left myself much space to discuss *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* and *Rio Grande*, which, since I regard them as almost total failures, is probably just as well. The first of them has, under the credit titles, another rendition of "the Girl I Left Behind Me," followed by a voice-over that sets the scene and period. "Custer is dead," the voice intones menacingly, sounding for all the world like Westbrook Van Vorhees doing the commentary for *The March of Time* (beautifully parodied near the beginning of *Citizen Kane*). As the commentator goes on, it becomes speedily clear that in this film there's going to be no nonsense about Noble Savages: the "Indians" are described and shown throughout (with one small exception, nearly at the end) as being destructive of all civilized values and appurtenances — coaches and telegraph poles at the start — and as having declared war on "the U.S. Cavalry," no reason being given for this inexplicable outbreak of hostility (doubtless the "Indians" are what Mr Hubble would call "Naterally wicious").



She Wore A Yellow Ribbon: Ben Johnson, John Wayne

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon:
John Wayne, George O'Brien



Nathan Brittles/John Wayne is about to retire, and the film is the story of his last few days of active service, though in fact at the end, after employing a ruse to prevent the impending "Indian" attack, he is reappointed, as a scout. His unsuccessful attempt to evacuate two women from the Fort is intertwined with the rivalry of two young officers for the favours of the younger girl (Joanne Dru), and we are meant, I think, to be interested in finding out for which of them she is wearing a yellow ribbon (a sign that one has a sweetheart). Ford understandably seems little interested in this rather noveltish strand of the story, which is directed, and certainly acted, quite perfunctorily. The film is much more concerned with the feelings of a man who feels his life is over because he's about to retire, and Wayne plays this role with his usual self-contained stoicism masking the true feeling underneath, although to me he looks rather embarrassed in the scenes where he kneels by his dead wife's grave in the little garden she planted and talks aloud to her.

But what the film is really *about* is the series of what I earlier in this essay called "antinomies," though, as is not the case with those in *Fort Apache*, there is unfortunately little hint of complexity in the film's presentation of them. Where white women have husbands and children, "Indians" have squaws; where whites are settled, "Indians" are nomadic. On the one hand, we have gardens, flowers, furniture, telegraph-poles, coaches, openness, intelligence, the rule of law, fair dealing, ballads, bugles, formal dances, picnics, rifles issued by the U.S. Government, and blue uniforms. On the other hand, we have arid plains, wigwams, smoke signals, war drums, deceit and cunning, stupidity, the rule of barbaric instinct, torture, savage and discordant music, unlicensed rifles stolen from a crooked dealer, moccasins and feathered headdresses. The former values are, of course, the winning ones; the latter, losing. So far as I can see there is almost nothing in the film that contradicts this dismayingly simple lexicon of opposites. One wonders

how Ford could lose his earlier insights so completely.

I shall take up a couple of points from near the end of the film. First, Brittles' increasing desperation as his retirement draws near finds its counterpart in the old "Indian" chief's depression, for he too feels he has lived on into a world that doesn't want him — the young braves pay no attention to his cautious advice — and that he can't understand. He suggests to Brittles that they should retire together and leave the young men to do the fighting, if fighting there must be. A small concession is here made to the generally unfavourable presentation of the "Indians"; but I must confess that for me it is so small, and so marginal, that it has the effect of tasteless condescension. This comes out clearly, I think, when (secondly) we consider the ruse

by which Brittles (he is white, so his cunning is a God-given talent) averts the war. The young braves have, it seems, taken no precautions against having their horses interfered with, and all the bluecoats need to do is to kick up a lot of noise and make them stampede, so that the braves have nothing to ride. It is hard to think of a more contemptuous way of showing how improvidently puerile, really, are these savages, supposedly a fearsome legend throughout the West for their diabolical cunning. The apparent condescension to the old chief turns out to have been just that. And poor old Brittles isn't even allowed to ride off into the sunset with his solid silver watch: his disappearance and its sadness has to be averted by a dodge which is not much more subtle than his way of frightening off the braves' mounts.

Rio Grande demands, in my opinion, an even more adverse judgement — very largely because in it we can see clearly for the first time in the "trilogy" what roles Ford really imagines for women (which is perhaps surprising in the director of *Stagecoach* ... but then, after reflection, maybe not so surprising). *Rio Grande* — in which John Wayne again features as Col. York — continues to emphasize the barbarity of the "Indians," on one occasion referring to people being tethered to anthills and on another coming within an ace of actually showing us the horrible things done to white women — atrocities which, had the Cavalry not rescued their children in the nick of time from the old church where the whisky-sodden "Indians" had shut them up, were clearly going to be done to the children too. Even fewer concessions are made, in this final film of the "trilogy," to any notion that a savage can be noble; the contrasts between the "beautiful" ballads and marches of the White Man and the natives' minatory chromaticism are even starker and cruder; and the Palefaces' justice emerges as genially merciful when we see not merely one, but two, permitted escapes of an ex-Confederate deserter who was, we gather, defending his sister's honor when he

involuntarily killed her seducer.

Heaven forfend that we miss a platitude! York's long-estranged wife Kathleen/Maureen O'Hara arrives in hot pursuit of their son who, having flunked out of West Point, has magically appeared at his father's fort, determined to make him say "You'll be a Man, my Son!" To call the scenes between York and Kathleen "sickening" would be to stretch the English language beyond the extreme limits of eulogy. One can only marvel that the audiences of the time would tolerate being insulted by such shoddy dialogue and such inept acting ... which leads one to reflect that standards of human behaviour, like the conventions of feeling they reflect, are by no means a constant: human nature does change, even perhaps, in some cases, for the better. Even such hardened troopers as O'Hara and Wayne have difficulty in knowing what to do with their faces when being serenaded with the old ballad "Kathleen" by what in *She Done Him Wrong* would certainly have been called by its correct name, a chorus of singing waiters, obviously well-qualified to man what the late Senator Joseph McCarthy was wont to describe as "the Watchtowers of the Nation."

Joking apart, however, O'Hara's role in this film makes one question the kinds of roles allotted to women throughout these three films: are women ever more than the child-bearers and home-makers and cooks and forehead-bathers and long-johns washers and general dogsbodies of the nineteenth century? Does Ford have any serious perception, not merely of women's roles, but of women? The Mildred Natwick character in *Yellow Ribbon* seems a partial exception, but isn't she

(as with Cochise) just an inversion of a stereotype? And, come to that, what about men? We've already had the most serious reasons for questioning the function — even the conception — of male roles, the purpose of the Cavalry, the justification (if any) of the "Indian wars" and the reservations, the part played in the whole story by the government in Washington, and the maturity, even the intelligibility, of the films' conception of "civilization" (perhaps, like Huck Finn, I should spell it "sivilisation"). Can we really say that Ford has any serious conception or perception of human beings?

Under these circumstances, I submit, John Ford, at any rate on the basis of these three famous films, deserves hardly any of the reputation which has mysteriously gathered round him. Always excepting such insights as came to him fitfully in the first film in the sequence, especially through Colonel Owen Thursday, we can only conclude that the "Cavalry Trilogy" is an intellectual, moral and racial insult. We know that "the evil that men do lives after them," and we defer (rightly?) to that principle in the case of Nazi and other propaganda films. But what are we to do with films which, despite constant flashes of insight and intelligence, have an overall ideology that is so repugnant? Should we ban them? Or, contrariwise, gratefully pat them for showing us how people "used to think in the dear old dark days" which are, of course, no more?

Tony French is the author of a book on Shakespeare and a university professor of English (retired); he lives in Australia.



Rio Grande: the estranged couple in confrontation (Maureen O'Hara, John Wayne)

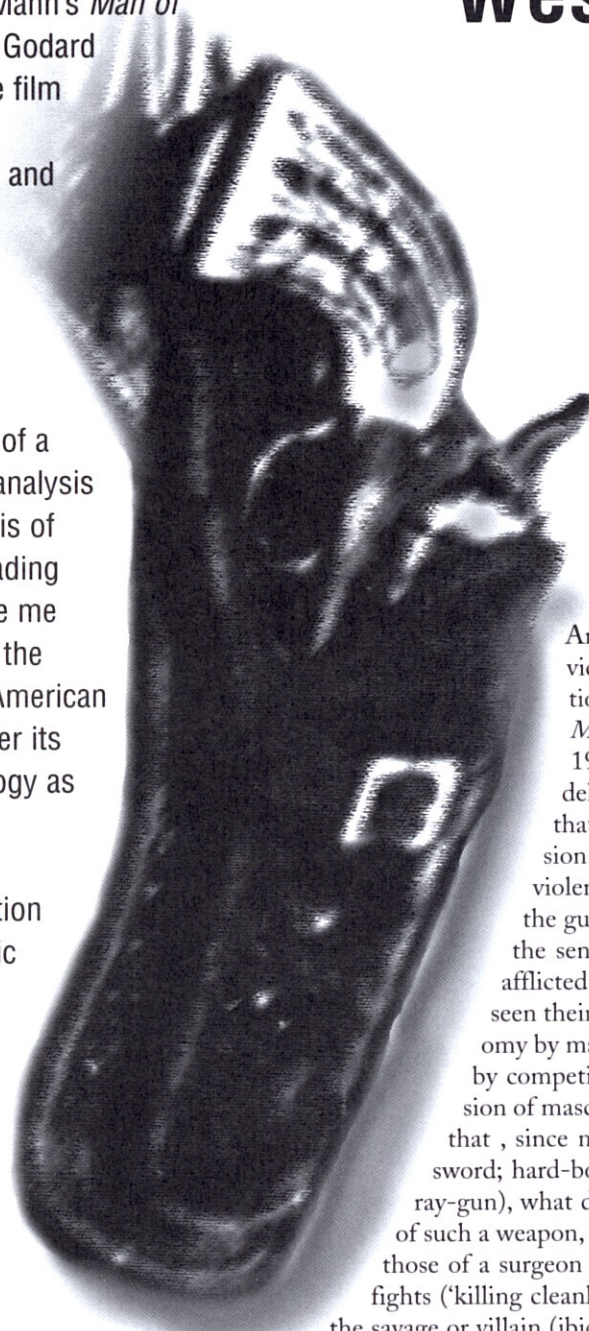
'ONE IN A THOUSAND'

Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns

by **Brian Fairlamb**

In a striking phrase in his 1959 review of Anthony Mann's *Man of the West*, Jean-Luc Godard commented that the film portrayed 'both the mystery of firearms and the secret of this mystery' (Godard on Godard, Milne, T., tr. & ed., Secker and Warburg, 1972, p.117).

This film has since become something of a canonic text in the analysis of the post-war crisis of masculinity, and reading these remarks made me want to re-examine the part played by the American gun culture, or rather its mystique and ideology as manufactured by Hollywood, in the industry's construction of ideals of authentic male heroism and individuality during the 1950s.



Among the genre critics who have attempted to provide some insight into this 'mystery' of the fascination of American gun culture, Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), remains an influential work, but one which delivers less than the title promises on the analysis of that mystique. His main conclusion, in a short discussion on the subject, is that both the social incidence of violence with guns and of the celebration in movies of the gunfighter are symptoms of a 'complex cultural force: the sense of decaying masculine potency which has long afflicted American culture' (ibid., p.58). Men, who have seen their importance eroded in the modern industrial economy by machines, national government and big business, and by competition from women, cling on to a 'symbolic expression of masculine potency', the six-gun. Cawelti further argues that, since many genres use such phallic symbolism (knight – sword; hard-boiled detective – automatic pistol; Buck Rogers – ray-gun), what distinguishes the cowboy hero is not his possession of such a weapon, but the *way* he uses it. The hero's special skills (like those of a surgeon or artist) and disciplined code of conduct in gun-fights ('killing cleanly and purely at a distance') differentiate him from the savage or villain (ibid., p.61).

What this discussion, which centres upon how guns are used, leaves aside, however, is the importance of the ways in which they are carried or worn and how they are perceived and looked at by others (not least by a potential audience), and which are distinctive to this genre. In detective films guns are used only by certain individuals in the business of crime or its detection and are often concealed or used covertly, while in war films,

though displayed, they are justified by the battlefield context and only carried and used by the exercise of patriarchal authority. In the typical Western environment most men wear guns habitually as a social necessity or constitutional right, though they may temporarily deny themselves for personal reasons (Johnny Logan in *Johnny Guitar*, 1954; George Temple in *The Fastest Gun Alive*, 1956), or reluctantly accept that there are certain milieux where they have to be put away (Link Jones packs his gun in a carpet bag when making a journey by train in *Man of the West*). That such dis-arming of the male is felt to be abnormal or perverse is evident in Mann's 1950 film *Winchester 73*, where Wyatt Earp makes everyone hand in their guns on entering Dodge City, thus giving rise to the first of several complaints from men feeling 'naked' or 'undressed' without their guns. Later, after leaving Dodge City in haste without their guns one outlaw says: 'I haven't felt this naked since I last had a bath'.

Hearing this reminded me of a perceptive article entitled 'Why Do Cowboys Wear Hats In The Bath?' (*The Movie Book of the Western*, Cameron, I., & Pye, D., eds., Studio Vista, 1996, pp.50-62) in which Martin Pumphrey takes such expressions of anxiety about the nakedness represented by being without guns in situations requiring action, and links them directly to his analysis of a code of cleanliness through which they can be argued to reveal a generalized anxiety about the display of the male body — or, more specifically, about the invitation for it to be looked at. Nakedness gives rise to anxiety because, Pumphrey argues, it 'diminishes masculinity' and associates it with the feminine, while, at the other end of the scale, dandyism and narcissism are dangerous because of their implications of homosexuality or weakness in a man. He then concludes that the moral superiority of the hero — already associated in Cawelti with special skills and code of conduct — is codified in his type of cleanliness, 'characterized by a disregard for self-exhibition'.

Pumphrey is one of a number of critics who have found in the Western a location in which to study the ambivalence to be found both in directorial intentions and spectatorial responses where the male body is used as spectacle. Less attention than it deserves has been given, I feel, to the importance of the gun in this context, particularly as it is so intimately a part of the Western protagonist's idea of being properly clothed and of the source of his anxieties about being caught naked or defenceless. In Pumphrey's reading, open display, or the invitation to others to gaze at him is a sign of transgression by a protagonist of the very discourse within which the Western hero is constructed. But, while it is true, as previously remarked, that the hero may be compelled in certain social situations to put his gun away and consequently feel destabilized, there are many instances where his display of his guns and his prowess with them in the public arena (and consequent willingness to attract public attention and admiration) transgress that disregard for self-exhibition which, in Pumphrey's argument is the mark of 'the forms of masculinity the Western registers as most authentic...' (ibid., p. 56).

Though he has been seen in roles which reveal weak, fem-

inized or comic characteristics, James Stewart in Mann's *Winchester 73* plays that very kind of authentic Westerner, coded as clean but not self-regarding — a quality highlighted in the film by contrast, on the one hand with his villainous brother (Stephen McNally), dressed in black and unshaven, and on the other with the flamboyant Johnny Waco Dean (Dan Duryea) — and yet who can — without any embarrassment — parade his weapons and his shooting skills in public shooting competitions. Gary Cooper, the 'authentic' Westerner in Aldrich's *Vera Cruz*, 1954, competes with the younger rival, played by Burt Lancaster — and with the Emperor of Mexico — in front of the assembled aristocracy in an impromptu version of the same Winchester shooting match. Likewise there are many examples in films of the period where such men give shooting lessons or displays to a younger man or partner (Henry Fonda in *The Tin Star*, 1957; James Cagney in *Run For Cover*, 1954). The taboo upon male display is therefore relaxed in a number of specific social situations, and this extends to the rather self-regarding or masturbatory activities of the cleaning and priming of weapons in front of other men or in the domestic/romantic sphere in front of women, carried out with the kind of attention the same man would never be shown devoting to his dress or appearance in such contexts. Thus as he sits, as a guest in the kitchen of a single mother in *The Tin Star*, Fonda's gun priming activities assert his masculinity and independence (the gun represents his work as a bounty hunter) when opposed to the woman's sewing (denoting her subservience as local seamstress as well as her house making proclivities). As such, they are by extension legitimized as chores connected with work rather than pleasure and hence absolved of the taint of narcissism through relation to the code of discipline and control of the authentic Western hero.

The legitimation of the display of guns and of gunplay in public is less clearcut in the case of protagonists who are not professional 'guns.' Apart from the association with the profession or work ethic (a major theme to emerge in the 1950s version of the West), however, there is a whole gamut of accumulated and associated ideas which circulate within the ideology of American individualism that are used to sanction displays of guns and prowess with guns, and ultimately of the violent and deadly application of them. In both the shooting competition and the climactic shootout, the sporting metaphor, with its emphasis on toughness, competitiveness and individual success and national endeavour is foregrounded, as Michael Wood noted ('Nice Guys Finish Last', in *America in the Movies*, Columbia University Press, 1975, pp.75-96). The cowboy's habitual wearing of guns is, of course, justified by constitutional authority, through which guns come to be associated with the idea of nation building (and patriotism or militarism) — with several films featuring the historic significance of the development of certain models of gun (e.g., the introduction during the Civil War of a quick-loading model in the eponymous 1952 Gary Cooper vehicle, *Springfield Rifle*) — as well as the individual's democratic rights and birthrights, with all their associated notions of male adulthood or coming of age, of inheritance and the



sanctity of private property. Often, the hero's favourite gun — customized or intimately connected with him in some way — is closely identified with ownership and individual achievement — even, when stolen, symbolizing property itself and the loss of individual position in society, as in the case of the protagonists of two of Anthony Mann's major Westerns, *Winchester 73* and *Man of the West*.

Moreover, in a society where corporate and brand identity in the capitalist consumer marketplace had acquired such overpowering significance, the mythic or iconic status of certain models of gun, as my selected references have already suggested, were invoked in a series of narratives through which the development and use of firearms become metaphors for the historic forces of change and progress, American know-how and the American way. Yet, paradoxically, despite being artifacts of the era of mass-production, guns were often represented as individualized, made-to-measure or handcrafted, as with Wes Bonell being measured for a new gun in *Forty Guns*, or Lin McAdam winning the 'one in a thousand' Winchester '73. In this way the superiority and authenticity of the hero, foregrounded by his disciplined code of conduct with firearms, is reinforced by his intimate identification with a particular specimen, signified as exceptional in some way.

Thus a comprehensive ideology had emerged by the 1950s through which gun ownership and gunplay are represented as

a socially sanctioned form of male heterosexual display, and where the gun itself features as a medium for the maintenance of a homosocial identity or position. In some cases — almost a sub-genre — the maintenance or recapture of that identity or status after its disruption becomes the ultimate prize or goal of the narrative, rather than the anticipated romantic closure, and the gun assumes in some cases actual title-billing.

Such scenarios are represented in two 1950 releases which take as their title the model of a gun, as their theme the theft and recovery of these exceptional, sought-after weapons, and which both feature as their closing frames a close-up of the eponymous guns. Anthony Mann's *Winchester 73*, of course, is one of these, the other being a Randolph Scott vehicle directed by Edwin L. Marin, *Colt .45*, a programme filler which is nevertheless very interesting in what it reveals about the specifically American ideology connected with gun use and ownership and its direct bearing upon the period's notions of socially acceptable and unacceptable forms of masculinity.

Colt .45 states its ideological notion of the gun as a piece of innocent or neutral technology in its opening motto in (unattributed) quotation marks:

"A gun, like any other source of power, is a force for either good or evil, being neither in itself, but dependent upon those who possess it".

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Man of the West: Link (Gary Cooper) awaits Claude (John Dehner) for the climactic showdown in the ghost town.



This is superimposed over the double image, with one gun inverted, of the eponymous model in its display case, which provides symmetry with the closing frames; likewise the opening and closing scenes, which both feature the protagonist holding close to his chest his prized pair of guns, here proudly erect in a military style salute. The historical importance of the technological breakthrough of the repeating action six-gun is invoked in the opening scene, where the American victory in the war with Mexico — and the protagonist's status as the only survivor of his outfit — is attributed to the superior qualities of these guns. Similarly, *Winchester 73* opens with a dedication to "the gun that won the West" and an implied warning of the power that such a weapon can unleash when it falls into the wrong hands: 'To cowman, outlaw, peace officer or soldier, the Winchester 73 was a treasured possession. An Indian would sell his soul to own one...' The historical innovation of the repeating action of this rifle, and its use by the Sioux in the defeat of Custer, is referred to several times, and in the fictional world of the film the theft of the perfect so-called 'one in a thousand' specimen (or 'one in ten or twenty thousand' as Wyatt Earp would have it) by the murderous Indians from the gun trader played by John McIntire is one of the incidents portrayed in the story of its wayward journey back to its rightful owner. All the other owners are shown to possess it by underhand means. Dutch Henry Brown, the outlaw and brother/ alter ego of the pro-

tagonist, and his accomplice, Johnny Waco Dean, obtain it by theft and murder; Steve Miller is given it as a reward for courage during a siege of cavalry by Indians, though as spectators we have privileged knowledge of his actual cowardice in battle; and the gun trader makes his claim by gambling and suspected cheating at cards with the outlaws. This gun — endorsed as the best in the world by Wyatt Earp — is initially won fair and square by the protagonist through an extraordinary display of shooting skill in an open competition arranged to celebrate the nation's centenary — after which it is due to be engraved with his name. It thus adds its aura of perfection and national significance to that of the display of meritocratic achievement by a man whose code of behaviour and cleanliness (and just as significant, the association with James Stewart's star image) mark him out as an authentic Western hero.

All of this is fairly traditional stuff as far as the generic codes of the Western are concerned. The case of *Colt .45* is rather different, in that it has a number of features which contradict these codes and conflict with the ideological project they represent. Firstly, it affords the heroic position to a gun salesman, a character normally portrayed (cf. *Winchester 73*) as devious or villainous. Dressed in a formal jacket when introduced in this role, he does, however, still retain Randolph Scott's trademark neckerchief. And, once robbed of his livelihood and identity (he is mistakenly imprisoned as the outlaw's accomplice), he soon adopts the authentic Westerner's codes of dress and cleanliness. This contrasts with the shifting appearance of his opponent whose career and costume changes cover the whole range of Western villainy, from dirty, unshaven jailbird, through gang leader with dandyish characteristics, to corrupt town boss in more formal attire, bow tie and all. Secondly, unlike the fictional world of *Winchester 73*, where all white men, good and bad alike, are in danger from the Indians, here the Indians are the victims of the outlaws (they are ambushed, then impersonated and incriminated in an attempted hold-up of the stagecoach), and fight on the side of law and order. Rather than selling his guns to Indians, Capt. Farrell only succeeds in recovering them when assisted by Chief Walking Bear, with further assistance provided by the wife of an outlaw. If we follow such a scenario to its logical conclusion, it is clear that Farrell's weapons, the source of his livelihood, status and power, are restored to him only through collective action with the representatives of minority groups — namely, an Indian chief, and a housewife who combines both domestic woman and 'bad girl' characteristics. If Peter Biskind had been including this in his survey of the ideological content of films of the period (*Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, Pluto Press, London, 1983), he might well have categorized it as representing the worldview of pluralism '...the fifties' most important product...' (ibid.,

p.20) with group pressure working towards consensus, Capt. Farrell, like Eisenhower, standing for the triumph of the ex-military organization man. It seems to me more likely, however, that this convoluted scenario results from the intention to associate the Colt .45s and firearms in general (including the arms trade) with the forces of law and order, discipline, respectability and honesty — the code and demeanour of the authentic Western hero — while attempting to dismiss or gloss over the very problems created by the mass ownership of such lethal weapons. Farrell claims in his opening remarks that the company are selling only to lawmen, the guns are identified with the military heroism of the protagonist in a set-piece speech, and then portrayed as stolen and misused by a villain who is variously designated as 'diseased', 'rotten clean through' or like 'an animal,' 'yellow as a whining pup'. By contrast, the vocabulary of class distinction is also utilized to indicate the moral superiority of those who appreciate the proper use of guns — 'It's the gent behind a gun that counts', the Sheriff lectures the outlaw (who then proceeds to steal the guns and kill him).

In *Winchester 73* the same associations are made when the hero, winning the exceptional 'one in a thousand' gun in the centennial shooting competition, is presented with it by Wyatt Earp, Hollywood shorthand for frontier law and order and authentic masculinity. Here, however, the gun 'ain't for sale', and is much more closely identified with the hero's identity and personal property, since its theft is paralleled with that of his inheritance by his outlaw brother, alias Dutch Henry Brown, and from whom it is won back in the climactic shootout. The gun's journey is also paralleled with that of the female character, Lola, played by Shelley Winters, who is waiting for Lin McAdam (alongside his now superfluous and somewhat awkward sidekick) at the end of the film, as if to reassert his masculinity and unequivocal heterosexuality. Lola can also be said to function conventionally as a pathway into community and family — and peaceful normality — now that father and brother are dead, but there is little doubt throughout that McAdam's treatment of her is inspired by the Western chivalric code and that the gun — with all it represents — is the real object of desire, and the symbol and guarantee of the hero's identity, from the moment he, when handling it admiringly, says 'Real pretty' to the film's closure on the close-up of the nameplate on the butt.

The generic conventions plainly tell us that guns are the mark of a man and his potency, and the language used can often carry an erotic charge (speaking of male qualities of sexual performance and function, of size, weight, repeating action, penetration, hitting the target), but the aesthetic and desirable notions — of beauty, perfection of form or finish — are conventionally coded as feminine and are what enable the object of desire and veneration to — when necessary — assume a female character, thereby neutralizing for the mainstream audience any suspicions of narcissism or homoeroticism. Men are described as 'guns' for hire, like Griff Bonnell in Fuller's *Forty Guns*, 1957. Here, the very title itself makes this equation, and though Fuller himself has stated that it was not his but the studio's choice, there are plenty of examples of

such use in his script (e.g., Barney to Griff: '...Jessica Drummond and those forty guns that ride with her', and the constant references to Wes as Griff's 'second gun'). The fetishistic connotations of guns as icons of phallic possession, as several commentators have pointed out, are also prominent in the language and iconography of Fuller's film. The scene where Jessica asks to see and feel the weight of Griff's weapon, and the rubbing, measuring and related double entendres during that when Louvenia is fitting Wes for a rifle, and which culminates in the famous point-of-view shot of his desiring look at her through the gunsight, have often been cited (not least by Godard who paid homage to it in *A bout de souffle*). What is more interesting in the latter scene, however, is the way in which Louvenia is portrayed as dressing like a man, in overalls and peaked cap, and talking the language of guns and sexual frankness. Wes later describes her desirability in the same language, as being 'built like a 40/40' — in other words she is perfectly formed — and thereby sexually attractive — like a good gun, but she cannot be called a gun, presumably because gun equals manhood, and her role in life as the daughter of the town's 'shotgun' is, of course, to service old guns and manufacture new ones!

The function of gun culture in the marking of male adulthood and the passing of patriarchal power are also prominently featured in this film. In two contrasting episodes, Jessica withdraws her brother's guns for his lack of control (including sexual philandering) while Griff gives a Colt Peacemaker with special ivory butt to younger brother Chico,



with which the latter will ultimately enter the adult world of the gunfighter and later become a lawman.

Television Westerns as we move through the decade demonstrate even more graphically this ideological tendency. Ralph and Donna Brauer identified this as the second phase of this product, after the 'horse' Western, and nominated it the phase of the gun (*The Horse, The Gun and The Piece of Property: Changing Images of the TV Western*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975, p. 53). Usurping the horse as the hero's trusted companion, the gun here 'becomes an important member of the cast', and many stars carry distinctive or customized weapons. 'Like 1950's hot rods these guns are chopped, lengthened, embellished, super-customized and one-of-a-kind versions of the plain everyday ones used by everyone else' (ibid., p. 59). The exceptional nature of the weapons and their identification with the exceptional nature of the hero are complete in the 'confusion or fusion' of man and gun, in the Brauer's phrase (ibid., p. 63), in a series actually entitled *Colt .45*, whose opening credits play on the fact that man and gun both have the same name — Colt.

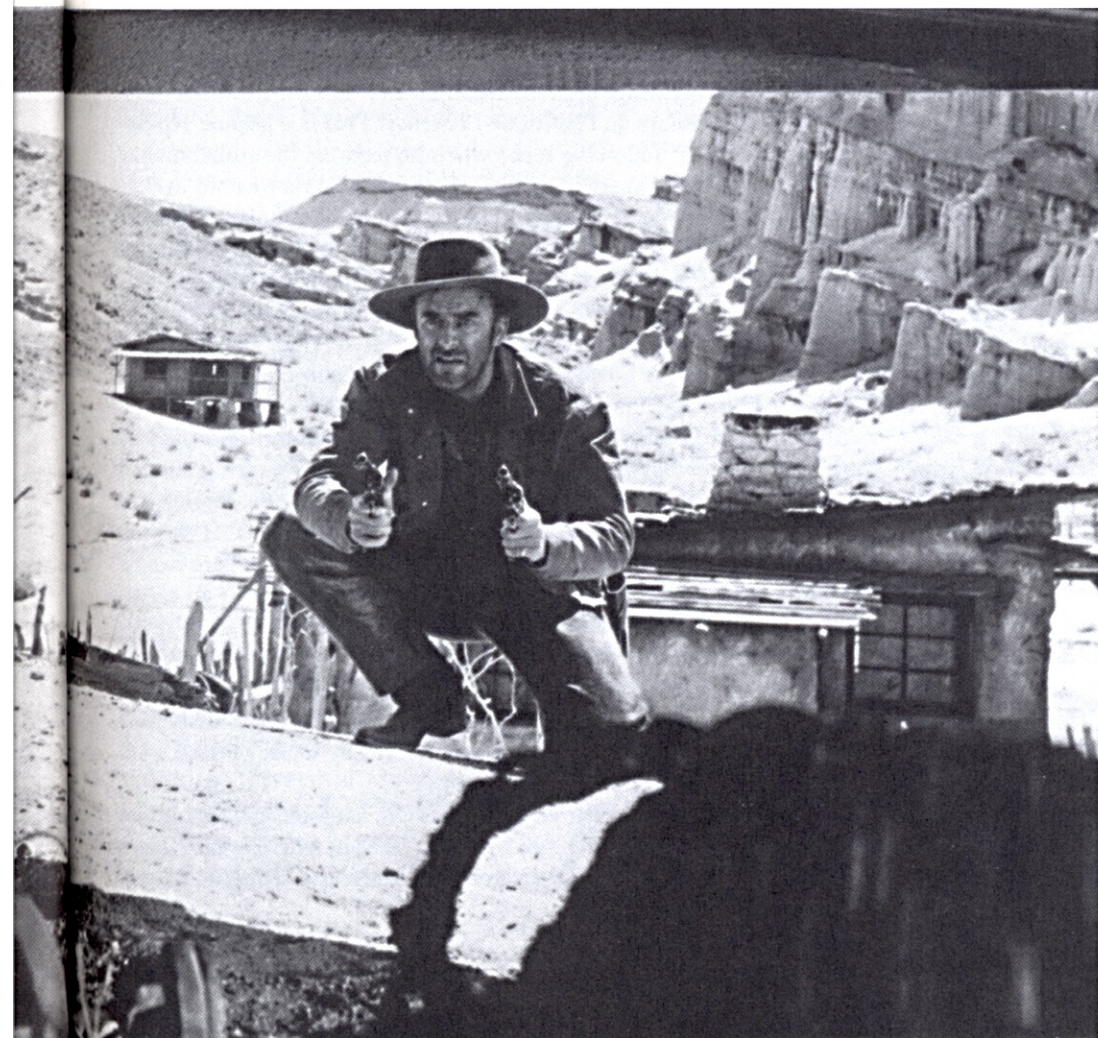
Thus the gun culture provided a socially sanctioned form of male display in which the taboo upon self-reflexive, narcissistic forms of masculinity and sadomasochistic fantasy was relaxed. But in order for this to be publicly acceptable, differentially coded behaviours which mark out the transgressive or villainous characters (and exonerate the neutral technology), like those pertaining to dress set out by Pumphrey, were developed in relation to the wearing and use of firearms.

Some of these will be well understood by any viewer familiar with the genre, but the following catalogue, while not exhaustive, is relevant to our current argument.

Firstly, and surely well understood by all consumers of the genre, Cawelti's authentic Western hero's code of discipline is contrasted with the excessive and underhand or delinquent uses of the gun to which the villain resorts. Like Brett, the outlaw in *Colt .45*, the villain is often characterized as diseased, inhuman or animal-like — he kills for pleasure or when unnecessary, shoots indiscriminately or wastes his lead, or shoots from behind or when his quarry is unarmed.

Secondly, rather than the permitted disciplined cleaning and priming indulged in by authentic heroes (like Henry Fonda in *The Tin Star*), the villain plays with his weapon in a provocative or threatening way (e.g., Brett with guns held erect in his lap and turning them provocatively towards Beth Donovan in *Colt .45*) or performs flash tricks with them. And these details are even more important for the purposes of audience identification and discrimination in scenarios where the distinctions between hero and antagonist are less clear cut, as in the case of Burt Lancaster's character in *Vera Cruz*, who, as David Lusted has pointed out, is 'not the villain ... but certainly villainous'. (*The Movie Book of the Western*, op. cit., p. 69). Thus Lancaster executes his trick-spinning of his gun even after being fatally wounded in the final shoot-out with Gary Cooper's hero (a man who, in keeping with the code, chose to eschew his Winchester rifle and revert to drawing his six-gun to make the combat fair and democratic).

Man of the West: Claude approaches for the kill.



Thirdly, as this example reminds us, the style adopted in the wearing of the gun, the size, prominence and positioning of the gun belt are highly significant. For knowing how to wear a gun belt can be as crucial to a man's success or survival as learning how to use a gun — as in this exchange from *The Tin Star*:

Fonda (Morg Hickman): Noticed you're wearing your guns too low.

Perkins (Ben Owens): That's where Sheriff Parker wore his.

Fonda: Parker's dead.

Thus a gun belt — when worn the right way — can be said to connote the control or balance of opposites required of the Western hero. It also, of course, doubles or parallels the male trouser belt, and both have a function in these movies in constructing a sliding scale of narcissistic or self-regarding behaviours from which viewers can determine those that can be justified as permissible and those which can not. Visually functional and understated or secondary to the gun belt, the trouser belts sported by Randolph Scott or Gary Cooper combine the imagery of containment and repression, which applies to all belts, with that of the latent power of the sheathed gun and the extra ammunition that the gun belt carries and legitimately advertises as part of its function. Their opponent's trouser belts are invariably black, larger or encrusted with decorative details (Brett in dandyish phase in *Colt .45*, Lancaster's in *Vera Cruz*), and their gun belts and holsters are often exaggerated or cavernous.

Finally, given the close associations and anatomical proximity of trouser and gun belts, the ultimate in transgressive behaviour is perhaps represented by those characters who steal not only their opponent's (personalized) gun and use it against them, but also take the gun belt, wearing it, as does Coaley (Jack Lord) in *Man of the West*, hanging it round his waist like a trophy, at a stroke doubling the nakedness quotient of his victim.

Cawelti's description of the code of self-discipline that distinguishes the cowboy hero's use of the gun from that of the villain was based on generalizations extrapolated from the early fictions or those tailored for adolescent audiences, and the two 1950 releases discussed above clearly subscribe to this formula. Later in the decade, however, a series of films emerged, of which *Man of the West* is one, which concern themselves with heroes who transgress this code through irrational or neurotic outbursts of violence. Their obsession with firearms or the powers of a particular gun (which may literally and metaphorically concern family inheritance) are portrayed as destructive or dangerous, which has the effect of pointing up the resemblances rather than oppositions between hero and villain. In the Westerns of Anthony Mann, as Douglas Pye observed, the central relationships are recurrently of this kind, and become progressively darker or more tragic in tone.

Indeed, *Man of the West* has been singled out by a number of commentators in recent years as a canonic text in the analysis of the crisis of masculinity, notably in articles by

Willemsen (1981), Neale (1993) and Pye (1996). Pye's study is actually entitled 'The Collapse of Fantasy' (*The Movie Book of the Western*, op.cit., pp. 167–173), a phrase by which he refers to the fantasy of the 'ideal man' and of such a figure contentedly settled — since the traditional life of male independence is portrayed here as savage, neurotic, regressive. He also discusses how, in the motif of the double, the hero must confront and destroy figures from his own past, and it is in this context, it seems to me, that the loss and theft of the gun and belt and their circulation within an enclosed male clan or society deserve further analysis. For, in the feud between Link Jones and Dock Tobin in *Man of the West*, Mann seems to offer a critical reworking of the themes he first explored in *Winchester 73*, since both hero and villain emerge from the same stock, though one of them has adopted an alias in order to disguise this. Such duplicity is part and parcel of the criminal character in the earlier film, whereas in the scenario of *Man of the West*, it is the good guy who changes his name in order to distance himself from the consequences of his own guilty past. This protagonist's identity and status, already precarious after being recognized by a lawman at the beginning of his journey, is further destabilized by the theft of money he was carrying (entrusted to him by the small community that had offered him redemption) and of his trusty, customized gun. That gun, like its forerunner in *Winchester 73*, passes from one villainous hand to another and it is only after being retrieved by the protagonist from cousin Claude's body that he can return to the final showdown with his symbolic 'father', Dock Tobin. Though less obviously the object of desire that it was in the earlier film, when it is retrieved the gun is shown in extreme close-up, Link's hand lingering over it, gently weighing it or feeling it as if to assure himself of its authenticity and continued potency. This is a gesture repeated in the following scene when he recovers the stolen money bag from Dock's body, and, since it is this that would in theory provide his passport back into the community and a settled life, underlines a pervasive doubt about what is most important to such a man, and confirms Pye's observation that 'Mann's protagonists are prisoners of a masculinity coded in hopelessly contradictory ways' (op. cit., p.173). These contradictions are nowhere more apparent than in the extraordinary scene of Link's fight with Coaley which culminates in the enforced stripping of the latter, on the surface motivated by the cowboy's chivalric code (since Coaley was the one who forced Billie, Link's companion and romantic interest, to strip). Rather than make him face his victim or apologize, however, Link physically strips the man with his bare hands, then lies on top of him to attempt strangulation — an excessive reaction resembling a rape, which must lead us to question whether Billie's mistreatment is the real impetus for his rage and the real source of its eroticism. For the payback here seems motivated by the attack upon Link's own masculine status and potency that is symbolized by Coaley's possession of his gun and gun belt.

When entering Dock Tobin's lair, Link recognizes his gun being used against him by young Coaley, who is wearing two gun belts (a coded indicator of an excess of villainy, and, bear-

ing in mind all that was said above about the significance of belts, let us note again that the payback involves Link's stripping off the latter's belt and trousers). Soon, Coaley uses this gun to kill a wounded gang member. At this point the camera is positioned low behind Link, who puts his hands behind him (possibly to conceal his feelings or to draw the viewer's attention to his 'nakedness' in having no gun to reach for), inserts them inside his trouser belt (suggesting the repression of emotion or desire) and clenches them helplessly, in an image which evokes the tension, revulsion and impotence provoked by his predicament. His waistcoat, we observe, is fringed at the back, seeming to imply his own repressed or hidden deviant or dandyish qualities. The low camera angle identifies us with Link's position, but not his look or eye line. Demonstrating the lack of gun and gun belt, this is an inversion of the many close-ups of guns, gun belts and cowboy groins, in movement or ready for action, that normally inhabit the Western. Narratively and visually the following scene of Billie's enforced striptease confirms the hero's loss of position, and impotence or inability to act. This is done through various strategies — Link is here cast in a woman/victim's position, a hostage dominated and wounded; he seems to disappear from rear shots when Coaley stands over him, knife to his throat; and there is the disruption of his look — symbolically castrated through shame, pain or anxiety, he cannot return Billie's gaze. The cine-psychoanalytical dynamics of this scene, complex and fascinating though they are, must be left for analysis elsewhere; what is important for our argument is the foregrounding of the theme of vision and looking as an indispensable feature of the gunman's armoury. The direct, piercing, dominating looks required of the gunfighter, who must aim accurately and never waste his fire, are those linked by Steve Neale with the phantasies of power and omnipotence and the narcissistic identification or projection of their own look experienced by the cinematic spectator (in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, Cohan, S., & Hark, I.R., Routledge, 1993, pp.9-20). He quotes in this context Laura Mulvey's notion that the male movie star's 'glamorous characteristics' and active look provide a point of identification — 'a more powerful ideal ego' — for the cinema spectator.

That such processes were part of Mann's understanding of the function of the male star in his films is clear from a 1967 interview, where he discussed Robert Ryan's lack of consistent success. This Mann attributed to 'a purely physical detail ... he has no look.' In a comprehensive list which contains many of the stars Mann worked with as heroes (Ryan he used as a villain in *The Naked Spur*, 1952) — Gary Cooper, Charlton Heston, Henry Fonda, James Stewart — he asked: 'Have you noticed that all the famous, much admired screen stars have bright eyes ... The look is everything: it is (sic) permanent reflection of the inner 'flame' that animates these heroes.' (*Framework*, 15-17, Summer, 1981)

Setting these men apart, their charismatic, fetishized screen image and their dominating looks are inextricably a part of the exercise of their trade, as both star and hero, an inner flame which is transmuted through the mystery of

firearms into a force that subdues all opposition — except the claims of settlement and domesticity. Having suggested this connection, I want at this point to make some concluding remarks — which will require further analysis beyond the limits of the present article — but which now seem to me plausible in the light of what has gone before. Richard Dyer has argued that the Hollywood construction of the charismatic star persona expresses our notion of individuality (*Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, BFI/MacMillan, 1986, p.8) and that it possesses its own particular codes of authenticity (in *Stardom: Industry of desire*, ed C. Gledhill, Routledge, 1991, pp.132-140). He has used Gary Cooper as an example of stars who are always themselves or always the same — 'what you value about them is that they are always "themselves"' (Dyer, 1986, op.cit., p.11). It is this quality which, in Westerns in particular, helps distinguish the heroic protagonist from all contenders, and this in turn is complemented by the ideology of the exceptional and authentic gun, the one in a thousand individual, and each by this association of ideas adds value or glamour to the other. Any resolution in conformity and peaceful domesticity assumes that the power and influence of the gun must be curbed, and that the inner flame of independence and individuality that animates the star/hero must to some extent be effaced or extinguished. Hence the state of Mann's heroes in the end has been variously described — notably by Pye and Kitses — as drained, exhausted, brought low (see Pye, 1996, op.cit., p.173).

Thus the complex and fluctuating interrelationships and exchanges of meaning and value between the latent and active properties of this trinity of the Hollywood Western — the star, the hero, and the gun — all revolve around the fantasy of the exceptional and authentic individual and create an excess or surplus value of this particular commodity. I want to suggest that any search for the mystery and secret of firearms that Godard thought he saw in *Man of the West* is contained somewhere within this constantly recycled association of the exceptional qualities of gun/man with the charisma of the star/man. Both are objects of desire whose purpose and identity — that inner flame — are destroyed by a peaceful accommodation with conformist and plural reality. The extreme form of the crisis of masculinity and the 'collapse of fantasy' in these Westerns of the late 50s therefore seems to me to be related to some extent to this surplus content of the fantasy or myth of stardom as manufactured and promoted by the Hollywood dream factory. And it is therefore partly an expression of the threat of the collapse of that particular fantasy (and the industry's own belief in its power and dominance) in the face of competition from a plurality of media — namely television, advertising and pop music — and their alternatively mediated constructions of personality or popular celebrity.

Brian Fairlamb is currently undertaking a Ph.D. Research Studentship at Sunderland University, England, researching Hollywood influences on the French New Wave, with particular reference to the construction of masculinity.

The critic..is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: "Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to...? How relatively important does it seem?"

F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*

by **Robin Wood**

Man(n) of the West(ern)

Preliminary

Man of the West is among the greatest CinemaScope movies of the 50s; others would include *Bonjour Tristesse*, *The Tarnished Angels*, *Bigger Than Life* and *Rally Round the Flag, Boys*. None of these is currently available on video, laserdisc or DVD in its correct format; the last two are not available at all. The copy from which I worked for this article is therefore missing approximately one third of Anthony Mann's magnificent film. I suppose I should be thankful that it appears to be an *older* video, made at the time when the video companies' solution to the problems of wide screen films was simply to lop off the sides: at least I can feel that I am seeing the middle two-thirds of the images Mann so meticulously and eloquently constructed, without the dubious benefits of 'pan & scan', the more technologically 'advanced' solution that substituted a worse barbarity for the earlier one, forcing the interested viewer to try to distinguish between the director's own camera movements and edits and those so thoughtfully added by generally insensitive video technicians. However, many complex shots in which different actions are taking place in different areas of the screen are ruined by this (the climactic showdown in *Lassoo* suffers especially), and many of the simpler shots are now misframed so that we see only half of characters' heads or bodies, depriving the film of the poised elegance that partly offsets or 'places' the multiple brutalities of the narrative. It is my opinion that such barbaric practices should be forbidden by law: consider the outcry there would be if the equivalent were perpetrated on a Rembrandt portrait or the score of a Beethoven symphony. It is a problem to which such committed and enlightened film restorers as Scorsese and Coppola might well devote their attention.

Man of the West and Genre.

Around the cusp of the decade there appeared three films that must surely be included in any responsible list of the 'ten greatest' westerns: *Man of the West* (1958), *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Hawks's film can (in this context) be left to one side: it has all the trappings of a western but none of its essentials, as

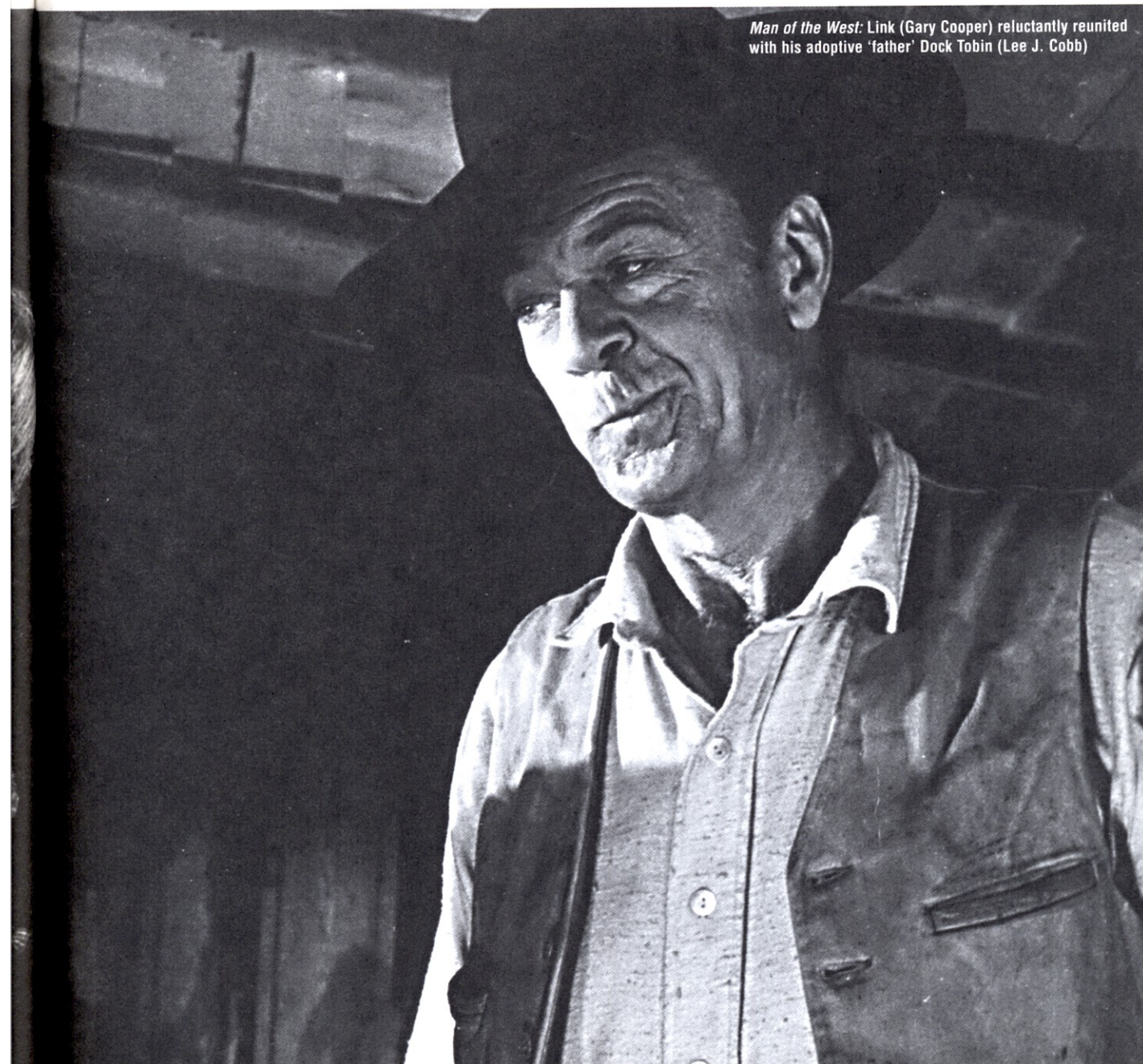


becomes clear if one juxtaposes it with its author's earlier *Only Angels Have Wings* and *To Have and Have Not*, neither of which would be mistaken for a western but both of which share in detail *Rio Bravo*'s thematic and narrative nucleus. Effectively, the other two, though sometimes categorized as 'revisionist', mark the end of the classical western, summing up and laying to rest its central concern with the taming of the wilderness in the interests of the growth of civilization. After *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, American civilization could no longer be celebrated or even, as in Ford's film, ambivalently and bleakly affirmed. The *truly* revisionist westerns are *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Heaven's Gate*, both of which, in their very different ways, represent unambiguous denunciations of the 'progress' of American capitalism, refusing by reversing the terms of the classical western - a development already anticipated (though necessarily, for McCarey, in comic mode) in the wish-fulfilment fantasy of America's un-founding at the climax of *Rally Round the Flag, Boys*.

L'Auteur est Mort — Vive l'Auteur!

It was, I believe, Roland Barthes who, long ago (as it now feels), first proclaimed the 'Death of the Author'. The author did not write, s/he *was written* — by ideology, primarily, but also by all the conventions, narrative patterns, generic formulae which support it and are, in their turn, at root ideological. The proclamation, and all the intensive but perverse and ultimately sterile ratiocination it made possible, proved indispensable to a few decades of relentless academic theorizing, 'learned papers' delivered at conferences, hence entries on resumé's. Many a misguided career, and enormous quantities of obfuscatory and mystificatory verbiage, grew out of it, proliferating into a protective forest of impenetrable branches, brushwood and foliage like that surrounding the Sleeping Beauty's palace, in the midst of which the initiated élite could bathe in the bleak cold sunlight of mutual admiration and emulation. It proved indispensable also as the basis of post-modernism, with its rejection (in its most extreme forms) of the old-fashioned notion that some texts are more valuable

Man of the West: Link (Gary Cooper) reluctantly reunited with his adoptive 'father' Dock Tobin (Lee J. Cobb)



than others. Its credo reminds me of the Caucus Race in *Alice in Wonderland*: 'Why, everyone has won, and all must have prizes' — whether they are Mozart or Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tolstoy or Harold Robbins. (Barthes, whose major work of textual analysis was on Balzac, and who agreed to play a celebrated Victorian literary author in a film by a leading French *auteur*, would, one assumes, have been horrified).

One hears very little, today, of the Author's demise; s/he has gradually and unobtrusively slipped back, in a variety of careful but flimsy disguises, into the general critical/theoretical discourse, though usually without acknowledgement or explicit recognition and definitely without the decency of retraction. What can now be said of the contemporary critical situation?

Certainly, the Author, like the rest of us, is born into and develops within that Protean monster the dominant ideology. Bad authors never move beyond that and their relation to it is simple (e.g. James Cameron); authors of distinction either consciously challenge it (Godard) or, through the peculiarities of their individual psychology, create disturbances within it (Hawks, Hitchcock), undermining it from the inside. No author works in a vacuum, creating works of pure genius out of some divine afflatus called 'inspiration'. Perhaps the theorists of the past few decades would like, at least, to claim responsibility for such radical insights. But I have news for them: similar assumptions have long been present (perhaps in less fully articulated formulations, because greater explicitness seemed unnecessary) in traditional aesthetics. The most conservative of traditional literary critics — and that profoundly radical one F.R. Leavis, who spelled it out — were not unaware that Shakespeare invented neither the iambic pentameter, nor blank verse, nor the rhymed couplet, nor the plots of his own plays, nor the genres and manifold formal conventions of the Elizabethan theatre. He simply *used* them far beyond the capabilities or ambitions of any of his contemporaries. Neither was he untouched by the ideological norms and assumptions of his age. That he transcended this complex of conditions, restrictions and influences was due to his immense fund of creativity, and can be explained in no other way. Without the artist there is no art. To deny the reality of human creativity — or to fail to honour it — is to refuse any value to human existence, art being only one of the forms (the most concrete, where its workings can be most readily perceived and appreciated) that creativity can take. Such a belief has never been more necessary than it is today, when creativity has been so stunted, frustrated and perverted within our culture by the 'advance' of capitalism ('corporate', 'monopoly', 'consumer', whatever). Only a revolutionary resurgence of the creative spirit (manifesting itself necessarily within a new, extreme, radical Left) can give us any hope for the future of our civilization, and indeed for that of life on this planet.

The reference to Leavis was not accidental or circumstantial. For all his limitations, blindnesses and obstinacies he remains one of the most *necessary* of all critics, and his work should still be a living force. His detractors have barely penetrated the surface of his significance: minnows nibbling impotently at a shark. For a more detailed, albeit tentative, account

of how the essentials of Leavis's position could be incorporated within a contemporary radicalism, see my article in *CineAction* 8, reprinted as part of the introduction to *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, and its sequel, 'Creativity and Evaluation', in *CineAction* 21/22.

Mann the Author.

First, the 'author' I am concerned with here is that of the series of westerns beginning with *Winchester 73* and culminating in *Man of the West*, all but the last starring James Stewart. There is also the author of the earlier (and very impressive) series of B-movie *noirs* and the author of the later (and also very impressive) epics, *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Certainly one can trace, through all of these, specifiable recurring characteristics of style and theme that would point to an overall author called Anthony Mann. Yet when an artist shifts into a new genre he becomes, inevitably, a somewhat different author, the characteristics inflected, modified, extended by the generic particularities: the Shakespeare of the romantic comedies is not quite the same Shakespeare as that of the tragedies, though no one will fail to see close resemblances. Which is to say that one cannot isolate 'authorship' from the conventions, narrative patterns, audience expectations, through which it is expressed.

Second, there is the question of collaborators: most importantly here, stars and screenwriters. As for the latter, it seems to me clear on internal evidence (I can produce no documentation) that Mann exercised a considerable degree of control over his scripts — that his authorship is not only a matter of stylistics. The most fully developed of the Stewart westerns *Bend of the River* was scripted by Borden Chase, *Man of the West* by Reginald Rose, yet the two have so much in common (and so much also with the other Stewart films by other writers) that it is impossible not to perceive a common presence. Was it Rose who made *Man of the West* the most schematic, the most consciously allegorical, of these films, or was it Mann, by this time fully aware of the essential meaning of these works and wishing to construct a definitive statement? As for stars, *Man of the West* would clearly have been a somewhat different film if Stewart (with whom Mann's professional relationship had ended with some acrimony) had played the Gary Cooper role: different but not better. The hysteria at the character's core (and at the core of all Mann's characteristic protagonists) would have been far more overt and 'acted out', whereas with Cooper it is perhaps the more powerful and frightening because rigorously repressed, behind a stony face and clenched teeth.

The clearest way to define the Mann of the westerns is by an elementary comparison/contrast with the westerns of John Ford, so central to the wilderness/civilization opposition hence a touchstone for the difference of all other westerns, both in degree and in kind. I shall explore the differences under a series of headings.

Civilization, Domesticity, Community.

Belief in the value of white American civilization is at the core of Ford's westerns, and the poignance of his career — the tra-



jectory from *Drums Along the Mohawk* to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* — arises from its gradual erosion (though the disillusionment was already implicit in *Stagecoach*). That the belief necessitated the acceptance (seeming casual and unreflecting, taken-for-granted) of genocide is of course for the modern viewer the great and in many cases insuperable block to the acceptance of his work, and Ford's late attempt at an apology, *Cheyenne Autumn*, is thoroughly compromised, his 'savages' suddenly noble ones, the presentation (for all the apparent effort) essentially condescending and sentimental. The belief, however, gave us Ford's most touching (and often highly complex) sequences, notably in the recurrent motif of the community dance of which the most celebrated is in *My Darling Clementine* but the finest in *Drums Along the Mohawk*. In Mann, civilization, although a touchstone for the characters' actions, remains little more than a conventional 'given', his work offering nothing comparable in its detailed and loving realization to those two dances. This is perhaps why his work often looks somewhat thin beside that of Ford, but it has

important corollaries: the native Americans play no more than a marginal role (if even that) in most of his westerns, with the crucial exception of the first, *Devil's Doorway*, the most outspoken and rigorous of the 50s pro-Indian westerns and the earliest, preceding the far more celebrated *Broken Arrow* by a few months; the cavalry (necessarily ennobled in Ford, crucial to his work as the defenders of white civilization) almost no role at all, appearing only briefly in *Winchester 73* and *The Naked Spur*. The problems for us today, maximized in Ford, are minimized in Mann, whose westerns are far more readily accessible to the contemporary viewer, far more 'modern' in their concerns and attitudes (it is no great step from *Man of the West* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, other than in terms of quality and intelligence).

As for domesticity, the necessary point is similar and follows on logically. Marriage and family are central to Ford's work, relatively marginal in Mann's. The domesticated woman (wife, mother) is at the heart of Ford's view of civilization — almost, one might say, the pretext for the extermination of the

Violence and pain: James Stewart in *The Man from Laramie*





Billie (Julie London) at the beginning of the enforced striptease.

The retaliation: Coaley (Jack Lord) stripped by Link.



Native Americans. The family as a concept is crucial for Ford, the films ranging through celebrations of its construction (*Drums Along the Mohawk*) or reconstruction (*Rio Grande*) to laments for its dissolution under the pressure of external forces (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley*). If memory serves, *Man of the West* is the only Mann western in which the hero has a wife and children, and we never see them; they are the pretext, not for the annihilation of a race, but for the civilizing of the protagonist. The other westerns all move toward the conventional 'construction of the heterosexual couple', but the effect is the same: the women (while vivid and lively enough to be interesting) are there essentially to give substance to the hero's motivation for overcoming his criminal past or continuing proneness to violence and be able to 'settle down'.

Landscape

Simply to mention the word in relation to Ford is to evoke mental images of Monument Valley, through which we shall picture either a stagecoach or a group of cavalymen passing, at once dwarfed and ennobled by its grandeur, the images accompanied by stirring music (either martial or exuberant). The corollary of Monument Valley in Ford's work is the green and fertile corn and pasture land of *Drums Along the Mohawk*, or the riverscape of the first Ann Rutledge sequence of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, both made in 1939. The human-friendly landscapes of *Drums* are never recapitulated in a subsequent Ford western, though there is an equivalent in *The Quiet Man*, an overtly nostalgic film about a past its extreme stylization suggests is more mythic than actual. There is an obvious, prosaic reason for this: *Drums*, while generically a western, is set in the East. Nevertheless, its landscapes are poetically appropriate to the film that is Ford's only unambiguous celebration of a possible American future, a future that could be convincingly envisaged only by a return to the remote 'American' past, the War of Independence. Landscape in Ford, it must be stressed, whether the Monument Valley desert or the fertile meadowland, is never merely decorative or picturesque. I find it difficult to recall shots in his films of unpeopled landscapes. The derivation of his images seems rather to be from the figures-in-a-landscape paintings of nineteenth century Romanticism, more specifically in their gentler manifestations, more Constable than Turner, ennobling even when awe-inspiring.

Where Ford has mesas, Mann has mountains: not quite perhaps Hopkins' '...cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed' as they are real as well as metaphorical, yet one might certainly say of them 'Hold them cheap/ May who ne'er hung there'. No one would attempt to climb a Monument Valley mesa, and they are perfectly easy to go around; when a mountain appears in a Mann movie you are pretty certain that it will be climbed, and with extreme difficulty. If Ford's 'mountains' are always more than picturesque, Mann's are not picturesque at all. As for the fertile landscapes, they are also present but invite the same kind of comparison as the treatment of community and domesticity:

their presentation is altogether more perfunctory than it is in the Fordian equivalent. What seem the most fully characteristic, most fully realized, of Mann's westerns — *Winchester 73*, *Bend of the River*, *The Naked Spur*, *Man of the West* — are all archetypal 'journey' movies, and their trajectories are always similar: a progression from low to high, from the fertile valley to the highest (usually barren, often snow-covered) peaks, each stage of the journey marking a development in an increasingly intense conflict of which either the turning point (*Bend of the River*) or the climax and resolution will be reached at the summit.

Violence

Considering the amount of violence that necessarily occurs in Ford's westerns, he seems curiously reticent about its effects, seldom lingering on the pain inflicted; one might reasonably complain that people in his films die too easily, the 'bad' (especially if they are 'Indians') simply falling over, the 'good' preserving their courage and endurance to the end. (Interestingly, the nearest to an exception is *Drums Along the Mohawk*, as if the film were trying to insist on the immense cost demanded by its affirmation). Mann, while no better on the death of aborigines on the few occasions on which they appear, consistently emphasizes the effort and horror of killing, the pain of an inflicted wound, the agony of violent death. Where Ford keeps us at a distance, Mann forces us in close, sparing us as little as contemporary censorship would permit. The most extreme instance (though it has numerous rivals, especially in *Man of the West*) is perhaps the deliberate, point blank, shooting of James Stewart's gun hand in *The Man from Laramie*, our view transferred from the gun pressing into the forcibly extended hand to a closeup of Stewart's face as the bullet is fired. In the overall context of the films, this 'in your face' insistence is placed, balanced, but never cancelled out, by the equally characteristic use of long shot, crane shots, depth of field, and, in *Man of the West*, Mann's superb use of the width of the CinemaScope screen.

In Ford, violence is a necessary evil but not central to his preoccupations. In Mann it is an essential aspect of his central theme, which one might here define as his sense of an inherent and ultimately inextinguishable criminal violence in male humanity: his heroes may struggle against it and even appear to succeed, but we are left with the sense that it has been suppressed rather than annihilated; his villains are those who don't struggle. The films permit one to see this as 'essentialist', but it might equally be enlisted as an exceptionally 'felt' and powerful precursor of the critique of 'masculinity' which has become a major concern since the re-emergence of feminism in the 60s. To draw these threads together: the harshness of Mann's view of (at least) male humanity is mirrored in the harshness of his landscapes, and accounts for the general lack of confidence in the films' presentation of community and civilization.

I must leave the contrast with Ford to mention two other facets of Mann's preoccupations that have direct bearing on *Man of the West*. Readers will have noticed that, in my dating of the end of the 'classical' western, I ignored Andre Bazin,

who placed its demise much earlier. But Bazin's definition of the 'classical' western was much too narrow: its development into the 'psychological western' of the 50s was more logical extension than departure, locating the civilization/wilderness dichotomy as internal as well as external conflict, the struggle now taking place *within* the protagonists' individual psyches. Mann's westerns offer the finest, most fully elaborated, examples of this development.

Finally, it is worth citing Mann's unrealized project when he died: a western based on *King Lear*, the three daughters changed into sons, to be entitled *The King*. The project was not new — he had been haunted by *Lear* for many years — and one can trace figurations of it in at least two of the westerns. It is clearest, perhaps, in *The Man from Laramie*, where only one of the three 'sons' is related to the patriarch by blood, and in which the patriarch goes blind, thereby combining Lear and Gloucester in a single character. But if *The Man from Laramie* is nearest in narrative, *Man of the West* captures far more of the *spirit* of *Lear*, the play's excesses, its horror and terror.

Man of the West.

A basic Leavisian principle is that true criticism is a collaborative act between critic and reader, an imaginary dialogue: 'This is so, isn't it?'... 'Yes, but...' Obviously, this presupposes that the reader is already in possession of the object criticized. This is not a situation one finds today too often in university teaching: I have had students whose essays consist largely of quotations from a wide range of critics, accepted without question because they are in print, on films that they (the students) have not seen. It is not really their fault: in many cases (I have found), it is what other professors have taught them is meant by the term 'research'. And in any case the unthinking acceptance of secondhand opinion is among the many diseases of our contemporary cultural situation in which 'education' professes to encourage freedom of thought but invariably places it within certain very narrow bounds. It should not (but may) be necessary, therefore, to say here that the following sketchy analysis is written for people who are already familiar with *Man of the West*. For anyone who is not, the film is readily available on video.

The Symbolic Drama:

1. Names and starting-point

I spoke above of the film's tendency toward allegory, and certain of its elements (especially its place names) are clearly allegorical. But, overall, 'allegory' is too clearcut; 'symbolic drama' suits it better.

First, then, the names, beginning with the two main characters. Link Jones/Gary Cooper, the reformed outlaw who has settled, is married with children, and is now a trusted member of his community, is clearly the 'link' between wilderness and civilization. Critics really have no excuse for misspelling *Dock* Tobin/Lee J. Cobb: he spells out his name for Billie/Julie London, and 'Doc' has no resonance. Two meanings of 'Dock' are resonant. First, as every gardener knows, the dock-plant is the hardest weed of all to destroy, its stem extremely

tough, its roots driving deep into the soil. This seems to me the primary meaning of the name of the incorrigible, aged and long-surviving leader of the Tobin gang. Secondly, to 'dock' something is to cut it off. Dock rapes the woman who loves Link and whom Link desires but cannot allow himself to touch: he is an extreme case of the 'castrating father'.

As for the place names: At the film's opening, Link is traveling from the new settlement of *Good Hope* to the established town of *Fort Worth*, his mission being to hire a teacher for the school newly completed; he stops briefly at the small intermediate town of *Crosscut*, the dividing line not only for the two stages in the development of civilization but also (as we discover subsequently) for the separation of civilization from wilderness, the rattlesnake- and outlaw-infested terrain through which the train must pass to reach Fort Worth, terrain that becomes Link's testing-ground, jeopardizing the fulfillment of his mission. The stages of civilization are very clearly defined. Link arrives in Crosscut on horseback (the railway has not yet reached Good Hope); he has never seen a train before, is startled by its blast of steam across the platform, and, when on it, can't squeeze his long legs into the available space. But even in Crosscut a train is still a sufficient novelty for local children to run along the platform waving as it pulls out.

2. The Journey

The journey from Crosscut follows the archetypal Mann trajectory and can be divided into six stages, marked by pauses, and an epilogue: from Crosscut to refuelling depot, the train passing through flat fertile land, trees bordering the tracks; from the depot to the farmhouse and barn of Link's distant past, the three stranded passengers (Link, Billie, Beasley/Arthur O'Connell) on foot; from the farmhouse upwards to the midpoint (of the journey, of the film) resting stop, site of the hand-to-hand fight between Link and Coaley/Jack Lord, a hilltop still green, with low bushy trees (death of Coaley); from there to the nocturnal stop among the mountains, a terrain of bare rock and snow, from which Link and Trout/Royal Dano will set out for Lasso; Lasso, the ghost town, once a thriving mining community, huddled amid barren peaks, site of the climactic showdown and the deaths of Trout, Ponch/Robert J. Wilke and Claude/John Dehner; Link's return to the previous stop, to find that Billie, in his absence, has been raped by Dock (death of Dock). The epilogue has Link and Billie riding away in Dock's wagon, through a cactus desert, presumably to Fort Worth.

Each of the pauses marks a progression upward into bleaker, harsher, more barren terrain; a progression in the external conflict between Link and the Tobin gang; and a progression in the internal conflict within Link, the resurgence of his own propensity to violence. This most fully conscious of westerns spells out its central quandary very explicitly in Link's speech to Billie between the arrival of Claude and the departure for Lasso (which Dock believes is still a thriving mining community on a stagecoach line with a bank that will make the gang rich). Link and Billie walk away from the group toward a hill on which there is a single dead tree, prominent in the background of the image through most of the scene. He refers

to his past (as Dock's adopted 'son'), and tells her that the people of Good Hope know of it and now accept and trust him; but now: 'I feel like killing — like a sickness coming back. I want to kill every last one of those Tobins. And that makes me just like they are.' By the end of the film (of the journey) he has fully satisfied that desire, and the journey's various stages continuously raise the question (never unambiguously answered) of whether Link kills 'every last one of those Tobins' because he has to or because he wants to.

Violence and Psychoanalysis

The film's great centrepiece (which only Mann could have realized so fully and uncompromisingly) where this question is most disturbingly raised is the fight with Coaley that culminates in the latter's death (though not at the hands of Link — Coaley inadvertently shoots the gambler Beasley who steps in front of Link, and is then shot by Dock). The word 'realism' is always problematic, but here it seems inescapable, at least as a relative term: we have seen so many slogging matches in westerns where two men go at it without pause, taking and giving punches with seemingly inexhaustible stamina until one of them abruptly falls. The Link/Coaley fight (perhaps the most painful to watch in a Hollywood film prior to *Mandingo* and *Raging Bull*) is meticulously thought through and choreographed in its ebb and flow of energies, in Coaley's progressive humiliation and desperation and in the escalation of Link's vengeful determination to spare him nothing. The viewer might ask her/himself a question: at what point in the fight does our sense of excess, and of Coaley's humiliation, become so strong that our identification with Link (an identification on which the film clearly, up to a point, depends) is weakened? — at what point do we want to call out 'No — enough!?' At or before the point where defeating Coaley passes into the act of publicly stripping him, before his 'father', Dock, and his 'brothers', the other gang members? An important aspect of Coaley's humiliation is sibling rivalry: from the moment of Link's return it is clear that Dock (even if he doesn't entirely trust him) privileges him, treating him as his favourite, the prodigal son.

Indeed, at the fight's outset, we may ask ourselves Why precisely (but the answer will be anything but precise) does Link deliberately provoke Coaley, needling him into (re)action with his taunts? There is clear enough surface motivation: Coaley held a knife to Link's throat until the blood ran, as a means of forcing Billie to perform a public strip for the gang; one humiliation deserves another, and Link (who has felt compelled to describe Billie as 'his woman', as the only terminology Dock would understand) can also see his provocation of Coaley in terms of a civilized 'manly' response to the deliberate humiliation of a woman he has treated, in their intimate exchanges, with consistent respect. Yet the explanation fails to satisfy, within the context the film has set up ('I want to kill every last one...'): Link appears to derive a personal, sadistically erotic, satisfaction from it. Coaley, like Claude, is Link's cousin, and, as a member of the gang with whom Link used to ride, rob and kill, hence (again like Claude) a possible *alter ego*, the Link that

might have been. During the enforced strip, he and Link are in close physical contact, Coaley behind the chair on which Link is seated, holding him with one arm while he holds the knife to his throat with the other; and he forces Link to watch Billie undress just as he, Coaley, watches. We are already aware that Link desires Billie, while forcing himself to repress the desire. We may see Link, then, when he follows through on Coaley's defeat by forcibly undressing him, at once as re-enacting Billie's strip whilst stripping the man whose physical contact may also have aroused him. In both cases the fight is an act of repudiation: 'No, I *don't* want those things. I have a wife...'

From Lasso to Lear

Of the four violent deaths that occur in *Lasso*, only that of Ponch could be called 'conventional', the other three all being, in different ways, shocking. We do not expect the plump, middle-aged Mexican woman, perceptibly trembling as she tries to steady the gun in both hands, to be abruptly shot dead: she is the kind of character who is usually exempt. She is terrified, and clutches the gun only in a desperate attempt to defend herself and what property remains within the abandoned bank; when Trout shoots her she is saying 'There is no bank here...I'm afraid...', and Link is replying 'Lady, we're not going to hurt you.' Trout's own death, shot by Link in self-defence, is the one time in the film he makes a sound: a series of terrible, high-pitched, agonized cries as he staggers down the ghost town's main street toward Dock's camp before falling in the dust. Mann's staging of Claude's death is the most resonant of all. When the gang first appeared in the film they hid in the shadows under the small bridge by the water-tower, the train (with Link on board) stopping on the tracks above them, a telling image of the 'civilized' conscious and the criminality and violence it represses, of Link's 'buried' past. The image is echoed at the *Lasso* climax. Claude, like Coaley, is Link's cousin and *alter ego*, the man he might have become. Link is on the porch of the bank, Claude (already severely injured) crawling underneath in the shadows to fire upwards through the boards. In order to kill him Link must descend to his level, distracting Claude by hurling one gun along the porch, then rolling down to the ground, parallel, to kill him with another.

Link returns to camp to tell Dock that he killed all three of his remaining 'sons', and finds that Dock has raped Billie — brutally and violently, as it clear that she has put up a struggle: Lear-as-rapist anticipates Lear-as-molester (of both his elder daughters) in the frustratingly disappointing feminist rethinking of the play, *A Thousand Acres*, closer in plot than *Man of the West* but far further from it in spirit and intensity. He tells Dock that he is going to 'take him in', but we know that he knows that Dock is extremely unlikely to permit this, that Link will have to kill his 'father'. I have frequently found Lee J. Cobb's performances a liability, his desire to show the audience how much he is acting, what hard work he is doing, often going right 'over the top'. This is certainly true of *Man of the West*, but here it works, Mann using the persona brilliantly: not just Cobb, but *Dock*, is 'giving a performance' all the time,

desperately trying to convince himself (as well as his ragtag gang) that he is not an anachronism, that he still 'has it in him'. Without the larger-than-lifeness the grandiosity of the climactic confrontation would scarcely work: Link, his back to us, in the foreground of the screen, Dock in distant longshot, striding along a plateau of sheer rock, silhouetted against the sky, then descending to fire his gun first over Link's head, then, wildly, in his general direction, then that extraordinary fall, rolling down past Link, arms outstretched, trying to steady himself even as he dies.

If one accepts that the film is a sketch for Mann's projected *Lear*, one may ask, Who, then, is Cordelia? Link is, after all, from the viewpoint of 'civilization', the good son, Claude the bad. And Link is also Dock's favourite: he might say, as *Lear* said of Cordelia, 'I loved [him] most, and thought to set my rest/On [his] kind nursery.' But it is Claude who is passionately faithful to his father (as he tells Link on the journey, 'I watch out for that old man. I love him'): when Link kills him he clearly believes that he is already dying, and his motivation in continuing to attempt to kill Link is clearly to protect Dock. The film's disturbing power arises in part from its relation to the 'family melodrama': fidelity to family set in absolute opposition to fidelity to 'civilized' values rather than embodying them.

Journey's End (of the film, of the western?).

The final scene reinstates the *status quo*: Link and Billie are going (one assumes) to Fort Worth, their original destination, and to pursue their original goals (Link will find a school-teacher and return to Good Hope, Billie will get a job singing and being sexually harassed). But there is no return to the green and fertile pasture land on which civilization can be developed: Link is (ominously?) driving Dock's wagon, and they are passing through a rift between barren mountains, the only vegetation cactuses. What does this ending leave us with? The answer must be, I think, very little. Link's 'settled' life remains no more than a given, and we must take its alleged satisfactions on trust — if we choose to take them at all. The bleakness must be attributed to Anthony Mann's honesty: within the parameters of the classical western, and within those of American culture then or now, the wilderness/civilization opposition as a clearcut either/or choice is a choice not worth making. If we feel at the end that everything has been *emptied out*, we remain free to search (if we wish) for ways of transcending it. Mann's work defines this problem with great precision, great clarity, great force.

Note:

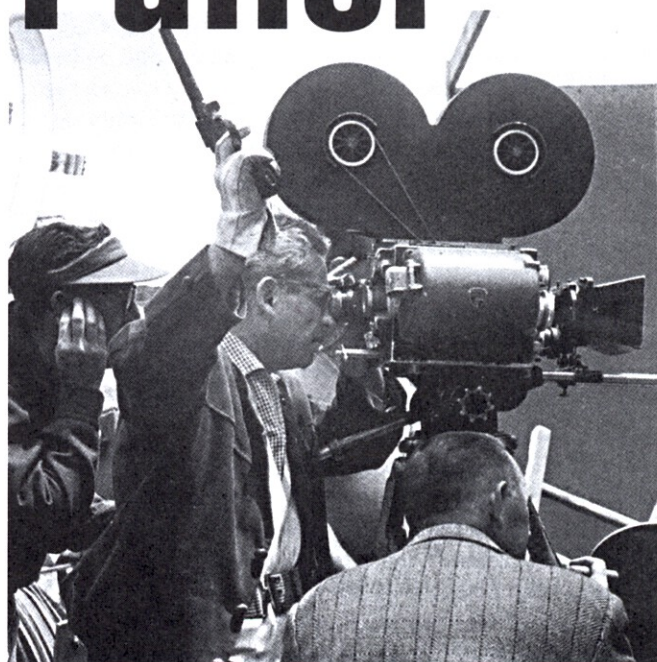
I am fully aware that this article owes a great debt to the writings on Mann by Jim Kitses (in his indispensable book *Horizons West*) and Douglas Pye (in *CineAction* 29, also available in *The Movie Book of Westerns*). I have admired both in the past but have deliberately refrained (as is my usual practice) from revisiting them for fear of feeling so intimidated as to be unable to write. I am not aware of any actual detailed 'borrowings', but if any are present here I hope they will find this acknowledgement sufficient.

Samuel Fuller

and the Western

A TRIBUTE

by Richard Lippe



Off with a bang: Samuel Fuller directs *Forty Guns*

Samuel Fuller (b. 1911) died late in 1997. This March, Cinematèque Ontario launched a virtually complete retrospective of his work, screening twenty-two films — the single omission was *Shark!* (1969), which Fuller disowned. The retrospective had been long planned and the scheduling was a coincidence, but, under the circumstances, it became a particularly fitting and loving tribute to this extraordinary filmmaker. In an essay written in conjunction with the screenings, James Quandt quotes Andrew Sarris's observation that Fuller's films 'have to be seen to be understood. Seen, not heard or synopsised'. Sarris's comment is very much to the point, but the retrospective also makes one aware that a number of Fuller's important films are either unavailable (e.g. *Park Row*, *House of Bamboo*, *Forty Guns*) or available on video only in an altered format (e.g. *Run of the Arrow* and *Merrill's Marauders* were shot in Scope format). The retrospective brings home to one how much is lost if the works of a filmmaker like Fuller aren't accessible.

When I lecture on the New Wave and on Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, it is often the case that Fuller gets mentioned as a reference-point. In effect, the acknowledgement is a mere lip-service to the influences of the Hollywood cinema on the French filmmaker. But, on seeing a 35mm.

CinemaScope print of *Forty Guns* (1957), one is jolted into understanding anew why Godard was so taken with Fuller. *Forty Guns* is a vibrant film which expresses Fuller's love of cinema. A great pleasure in watching it stems from the seeming ease with which Fuller executes a complicated shot, and from his ability to integrate stylistically complex elements into his narrative; he doesn't sacrifice the film's flow nor does he slight the theatrical/emotional aspects of the material while pursuing formal challenges. *Forty Guns* is a wonderful example of Fuller's inherent modernism. Godard specifically acknowledges the film in *Breathless* by reproducing the famous circular masking-shot in which Gene Barry 'objectifies' Eve Brent by looking at her through a gun barrel; in Fuller's film, the youthful Brent plays a gunsmith who isn't in the least submissive, which tends to undercut Barry's attempted appropriation of her through the gesture. Godard, in *Breathless*, has a critical Jean Seberg roll up a poster to take a simultaneously contemplative and playful look at a boxer-shorts-clad, highly attractive Jean-Paul Belmondo. Arguably, Fuller's unacknowledged presence is also evident in Godard's numerous long, lingering dissolves, particularly in the film's opening sequences. Throughout *Forty Guns* Fuller employs elaborate dissolves; the most expressive occurs late in the film



I Shot Jesse James: John Ireland, Barbara Britton, Preston Foster



John Ireland as Bob Ford



and features Barbara Stanwyck as she vows to protect her younger, psychotic brother (John Ericson) from arrest, knowing that in doing so she will alienate Barry Sullivan, the man she loves.

Fuller's stylistic audacity is matched by his approach to genre and characterization. In his essay, Quandt mentions that Godard dedicated *Made in USA* to both Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller; like Ray, Fuller was in the process of reworking the Hollywood genres, forcing them to yield new emotional and aesthetic experiences. Ray's and Fuller's careers were most productive from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. As some critics have pointed out, it is ironic that, while they were temperamentally and creatively at odds with the studio system, their careers collapsed with its demise. In regard to their respective sensibilities and approaches to genre, Ray's *Johnny Guitar* and *Party Girl* and Fuller's *Forty Guns* and *Underworld USA* make fascinating comparisons.

As this issue is devoted to the Western, I shall concentrate on Fuller's contribution to the genre, considering *I Shot Jesse James* and *Forty Guns*. (I was unable to see *The Baron of Arizona*, and *Run of the Arrow* was the only film in the retrospective not screened in its correct format; to be properly

evaluated it should be seen in Scope. Of the films I was able to see, *Pickup on South Street*, *Underworld USA*, Merrill's *Marauders*, *Shock Corridor*, *The Naked Kiss* and *White Dog* are exceptional works. I regret missing *House of Bamboo*, which, according to Robin Wood, was one of the highlights of the series).

Many critics have claimed that Fuller's westerns aren't 'authentic' in that they are not concerned with the genre's central thematics. But, while they strongly embody aspects that reflect Fuller's personal concerns such as the relation between power and corruption or the codes of masculinity, friendship, love, commitment and betrayal, they are not indifferent to the genre's concerns. In fact, Fuller's thematics are highly compatible with those of the genre, its traditions, its image of the West as a primitive elemental space that can become a site of conflict and struggle. If Fuller 'tampers' with the Western, it is primarily in that he constructs situations, and frequently characters, that don't conform to the archetypal figures that inhabit the genre; in regard to characters, the most extreme example may be found in *Run of the Arrow*, which features Rod Steiger as a hate-filled Southern nationalist, survivor of the Civil War, who, during the course of the



Approaching the
showdown.

A dying Bob Ford
admits his love for
Jesse James



film, undermines the genre's conventional attitudes to heroism, race, civilization. Rather than being a director who doesn't relate to the Western, Fuller provides a distinctive contribution to its evolution and its maturing in the post-World War II environment.

If Fuller had no real interest in the genre, it is curious that his first film as director was a western, *I Shot Jesse James*, which was set up as an independent production and therefore can't be explained away as a studio assignment. The film, which Fuller also scripted, is a mixture of Western fact/myth and psychological drama. Its top-billed actor is Preston Foster, but his screen presence is negligible, the role that of a supporting player. Instead, the film is centred, as the title suggests, on Bob Ford/John Ireland and his relations with Jesse James/Reed Hadley and a small-time actress, Cynthy/Barbara Britton, with whom Ford was romantically involved before joining the James gang. Fuller displaces Foster as lead-

ing man/hero figure, constructing Ireland as an anti-hero. Ford's ostensible motive for shooting James is that he will be given immunity and a reward by the government, which in turn will enable him to marry Cynthy and settle down into a conventional life as a farmer. But what Fuller sets up is much more complicated: the James-Ford relationship has a strong homoerotic undercurrent, and it is clear that Ford's motivation is as much a denial of his homosexual desires as a means to obtaining Cynthy. Significantly, after the killing, Ford attempts to make Cynthy responsible for the act, claiming that it was her demands that forced him to shoot James.

Fuller places the killing fairly early in the narrative, so that the film is essentially about its aftermath. The killing doesn't free Ford; on the contrary, it irredeemably binds him to James. It also places an overwhelming burden on his relationship with Cynthy, who becomes increasingly alienated as he, on his side, makes her his obsession. Their relationship is further strained when Ford begins to believe that Cynthy is in love with the Preston Foster character, who has been attempting to court her despite her evident lack of interest in his half-hearted romantic overtures. The narrative culminates in a showdown between Ford and Foster, in Cynthy's presence. While the stag-

ing of the scene is striking in itself, with Foster challenging Ford to shoot him, as he did James, in the back, the real weight of the climax resides in Ford's reunion with Cynthy. As he is about to die, he tells her that there is one thing she needs to know: referring to James, he says 'I loved him.' The statement is unexpected and touching in that Ford, through the admission, reconciles himself with both James and Cynthy. The film's resolution indicates the extent to which Fuller sees the homosexual element as integral to the narrative; it also suggests his respect for the relationship, placing it on an equal footing with its heterosexual counterpart.

With Bob Ford and Cynthy, Fuller produces considerably complex characters who undermine generic expectations. For instance, Cynthy isn't an innocent, youthful heroine whose function is to redeem Ford: as actress/performer she is coded as belonging to the tradition of the 'corrupting' woman, although (despite Ford's accusations) she isn't that either. Cynthy is too knowing, too disturbed by her ambiguous responses to Ford and their relationship, to fit comfortably into one of the Western's female archetypes. Like Ford, she is split in her desires. And Ireland's Bob Ford is essentially a sympathetic figure, although Fuller doesn't make him a charismatic anti-hero along the lines of Gregory Peck's Lewt in *Duel in the Sun*. The presentation allows some ambiguity as to how the viewer reads Ford: until late in the film there is a suggestion that he might be a psychotic killer. The possibility is most fully exploited through editing in a scene in which Ford, who has hooked up with an aged, alcoholic prospector, appears to have shot the man after learning the whereabouts of an alleged gold mine; but later we discover that Ford killed (as he said he was about to) a mountain lion about to spring on the old man.

Fuller, who usually elicits strong performances from his actors (even those one might consider unpromising), fully utilizes John Ireland, making the most of the actor's expressive face in a number of close-ups. From certain angles the face is attractive in a conventionally handsome manner, but from others it reveals a crudeness and an almost ugly disposition. While these close-ups are fascinating examples of how the cinema can convey a complex relation between actor/persona and characterization, the film is not, as Andrew Sarris claimed (according to the Cinemathèque brochure) 'constructed almost entirely in close-ups of an oppressive intensity the cinema had not experienced since Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*'. Although the claim is inaccurate, Sarris's perception may well have been shaped by his memory of Ireland's close-ups.

I Shot Jesse James, a film shot primarily on interior sets, employs (as Fuller's films consistently do) a highly sensitive play of light and shadow. Throughout his career he worked with some of Hollywood's finest photographers, including James Wong Howe (*The Baron of Arizona*), Joseph Biroc (*China Gate*, *Run of the Arrow*, *Forty Guns*), William H. Clothier (*Merrill's Marauders*), Stanley Cortez (*Shock Corridor*, *The Naked Kiss*). *I Shot Jesse James*, photographed by Ernest Miller, contains numerous wonderfully lit shots. In the climactic showdown, the two actors are on a set lit to



Forty Guns: top, the attempted seduction;
bottom, Jessica talks of her past (Barry Sullivan and Barbara Stanwyck).



express twilight; but, as the confrontation progresses and Foster refuses to turn to face Ireland as the latter advances towards him, Ireland is shot in close-ups in which he is surrounded by darkness. The effect is not only dramatic and disorientating; it also reflects Ford's inability to maintain his identity and sense of purpose, as in the previous sequence Cynthia has severed their relationship, fearing that he is no longer stable.

Although *Run of the Arrow* may be Fuller's most fully realized western, with its extensive location shooting and reconstruction of an Indian village, *Forty Guns* is undoubtedly his most notorious. Primarily, this is because it features Barbara Stanwyck as a powerful cattle baroness who is referred to in the recurring ballad as a 'high-riding woman with a whip'. (A balladeer is used throughout the film, functioning as counterpoint to its 'realist' aesthetic). The film belongs to a cycle of 1950s woman-centred westerns which, as well as *Forty Guns*, most notably includes Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* and Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar*. Of the three, Fuller's is the least selfconscious about the gender/power inversion and, particularly in contrast to Ray's film, much less hysterical about the notion of a 'masculine' woman. The film is set at the point where civilization is encroaching and the West can no longer sustain its outlaw existence. Stanwyck's Jessica Drummond is the embodiment of that primitive existence: through a combination of strength, manipulation and ruthlessness, she has built an empire. She is an individualist and, as the film makes clear, she is representative of what America is about; she maintains her power through dubious legal and bureaucratic influences. If Jessica represents one aspect of America's identity, Barry Sullivan's Griff Bonnell is the other: while he aligns himself to 'justice', he is equally self-interested and willing to sacrifice who or whatever is necessary to get what he wants. This is extravagantly illustrated in the scene in which he coolly shoots-to-wound Jessica when she is used by her brother (who has killed Bonnell's brother) as a human shield. In Fuller's vision, the West is not about 'good' and 'evil'; rather, it is about power structures and people who are obsessive.

Jessica Drummond and Griff Bonnell are mature people who both invest their emotions in the 'family' — specifically, in taking responsibility for their siblings. They first meet when he demands that she control her brother's public behaviour, and in the course of the encounter she attempts, without success, to seduce him by flattering his masculinity/sexual prowess; it is Griff's refusal to be corrupted that eventually makes him attractive to her. In a wonderfully conceived set-piece Fuller marks the transition in their relationship from adversaries to lovers with a wind storm which forces them to seek shelter in an abandoned cabin, the site of Jessica's youth. The love scene is predicated on Jessica telling Griff about her childhood and how she was forced into becoming the head of the family at an early age; in actuality, the scene is about Jessica allowing herself to be vulnerable. While Jessica, through a newly-found desire to gain respect and love, transforms and redeems herself, Griff (as the embodiment of 'the Law') remains committed to his mission. Griff kills Jessica's

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The 'Forty Guns', led by Jessica (on the white horse at the left).

brother, wounds her in order to do so, *and* retains her love. In *Forty Guns*, life in the West/America is brutal, and nothing comes without a price.

Forty Guns was shot on location in black-and-white; Fuller's CinemaScope images strikingly evoke the vastness of the West, the landscape a fitting backdrop to the emotional and dramatic conflicts played out by the protagonists. In addition to utilizing fully the CinemaScope format both in exterior and interior shooting, the film contains an exhilarating long take in which the camera tracks the movement of Griff and his brothers as they walk down the town's main street — another instance where Fuller expresses his delight in the moving picture, the cinema and its kinetic energy. And with his actors Fuller is in control. Barbara Stanwyck, a star/actor who has often given herself to ensemble work, gives a performance both theatrical and nuanced; she and Fuller don't allow the 'excessive' aspects of the role to dominate the characterization and the film.

In Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* Fuller, playing himself, says: 'Film is like a battleground... Love, Hate, Action, Violence, Death. In one word: Emotion'. He has often been labelled a 'primitive' because his films employ narrative and stylistic conventions that weren't acceptable to Hollywood's 'classical' tradition, and

in numerous instances the films *are* primitive in that Fuller was working with very low budgets and B-grade actors. The label also applies to many of Fuller's characters who act in seemingly irrational ways. This image of Fuller and his work has been reinforced by the critics, who can't seem to resist writing about him in other than hyperbolic terms. To an extent their approach is understandable, and probably pleased Fuller who, to judge from interviews, was as energized as his films. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that the films are often works of considerable sensitivity, intelligence and discipline. While his characters may at times appear irrational, they are, as Fuller conceives them, credible and consistent creations who are integrated tightly into often highly complex narratives which negotiate various plot-lines related to the overall thematics.

Fuller's cinema is primarily defined by his war and crime movies, but his westerns deserve attention, both in the context of his career and their relation to the genre. They are highly personal works, but they also display a critical understanding of and respect for the genre, and its significance in the shaping and defining of America and its ethos. With their energy, intensity and creativity, Fuller's films represent a major intervention within the dominant conventions of the Hollywood cinema.

From Clementine to MrsM

IN THE NAME OF P R O R

It is often the case that history is used as a shelter: a time bygone when things once were, and oh, how good they were. Safely stored away in yellowing books it becomes a repository of nostalgia, idealism, and folklore. When the pages dry up and crumble away (or get torn and "misplaced") new ones get written, sometimes a little differently, but if done properly no one seems to notice.

Those that do often object, and occasionally they will respond by writing their own. Few of them will vehemently struggle for the "truth", but most, however, will simply write what is necessary. Thus history continues to grow. It changes, rearranges, and re-invents itself. It becomes a continuous response to the present moment which itself is constantly changing. But because it does lie in the past, removed from the physical reality of the moment in which we exist, it can become a shelter. Of course, the shelter is twofold: it can protect us from both the past and the present. But as the two are constantly influencing one another, the difference is lost in the reciprocity: the past shapes the present, while the present suppresses the past. What arises is an ideology that encapsulates both. Within its amalgamation a perspective is formed consisting of concepts, theories, and assertions that constitute the sociopolitical orientation of a people and a culture. The ideological should not be separated from the influence of the historical, but it is more often the case that the historical is interpreted according to the ideological premise. It can therefore be said that history is used



S. Miller: GR E S S

by Ivan Yovanovich

to provide a shelter for an ideology. When it is re-written, it is because of an ideological change of perspective which the present so demands. The historicity of events is formulated to reflect a particular mentality. The events in fact may not even change, but their interpretation does. Historical definitions therefore become the product of ideological necessities.

Like most ages, our present suffers ideological insinuation. But what was previously the act of church and state has been exceeded by relentlessness of popular media (not without the influence of "old partners," of course, though one must say the methods have become subtler, more inconspicuous and harder to perceive, deluding man that he is "free"). But man today is hardly capable of self-definition. Cinema, a popular art form, is responsible for the formulation of social norms. More than any other art form it possesses the ability to incarnate ideology in flesh and blood. Because of its mass appeal it can border on religiousness: indoctrination through entertainment (within merely a hundred years it has succeeded in implanting "America" onto the rest of the world). But don't let me get carried away. This essay has a far humbler aspiration than tackling the influence of American dogma on the present day. What it simply seeks to do is examine a change of ideological stance within a given historical representation. For its model it chooses the Hollywood western genre, a genre most elaborately developed in dealing with the history, myths, and legends of the American West. The historical accuracy of these films is of no consequence to us: most of them are fictitious events placed within historical settings. What is of significance is the representation (interpretation) of these events in accordance with an ideological perspective. If history is a shelter for an ideology, these films are a reflection of an attitude toward the present. What that attitude stands for is the mirror in which America wishes to see itself.

I suppose the event this essay has in mind is the classic drama of the Western genre: the wheel of civilization rolling into the wild; the oncoming of "progress". Or the diagnosis of the first signs of "illness". For my purposes I am interested in two films, one of them known to every western connoisseur, and the other perhaps an indirect remake but certainly its commentator: John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*.

What joins these two films is the premise within which they take place: a still unadulterated wilderness with the child of civilization just beginning to form within. What separates these two films is the three decades that stretch between their making: a reconstruction of a perspective. What interests me in these two films is the appropriation of the present's response to itself through its rendition of the historical.

The title song begins; the camera is gliding down a road sign, cleverly utilized to reveal the film's credits. But the metaphor stands: all directions are open, all is free, all is reachable. The frontier is basking in the afternoon sun, the Earp brothers are driving their cattle on to new pastures. Yes, the land is brute and harsh but the settler's will is stronger. It is the year of 1946, America just emerging victorious from a war it helped win, itself relatively unscathed. Europe, in a state of convalescence, is in momentary halt: U.S. is eager to assume the leadership of the Western

My Darling Clementine:
Tombstone in Monument Valley



My Darling Clementine: Chihuahua furious, Earp impervious (Linda Darnell and Henry Fonda)

world. Thirty years later McCabe is riding through the mountains, the winter coming. Leonard Cohen's music is playing, the air pervaded with melancholy and nostalgia. I have a sense of irretrievable poetry. The lone rider is riding on, looking for that card "so he'll never have to deal another."

Wyatt Earp was driving his cattle and he heard about Tombstone. He went to town for a shave and in the meanwhile lost his youngest brother and his herd. Of course, he stays in town to make amends, accepting the job of Marshall (at James' grave he speaks of how he will stay in "this land" until it, too, becomes safe and free for boys like James - let us recall how long Ford holds the shot on James as he sees his three brothers off, his look so full of love and hope). At first appearance, McCabe, too, is the (lone) rider, "looking for a town." But as he reaches it he removes his fur coat - dawning a fine black suit — and puts on his gentleman's hat. The town is a mining community, the majority of its residents bearded men, plain and ordinary-looking: there is no carnivalesque music, no sombreros, no broken windows; nothing even

attempting to indicate that it might be the nineteenth century. In the hotel (the town's only business), we see McCabe up close for the first time. Before entering he lights a cigar; he wears a gold tooth, drinks from a silver flask, and carries a gun. When he steps out the men comment on the fact that he is armed — none of them seems to be carrying a gun. In fact, they say it's a Swedish gun, the kind that will stand you more scratch. When the proprietor (Sheehan) asks him whether his nickname is Pudgy and whether he is a gunfighter, McCabe responds that he is a businessman: he inquires about the town's property, understands that it is available, and leaves.

Unlike the anonymous cattle herder who rides into Tombstone to reveal that he is the famous Wyatt Earp (and stays behind to bring justice), McCabe rides into Presbyterian Church (anonymously), gets mistaken for a gunfighter, and stays behind because money is in the air. In the neighboring town he buys three prostitutes with whom he returns to Presbyterian Church to open a small brothel and employs the

town's men to start building a new hotel with a saloon: rather than passing for "frontier types," they resemble blue collar workers. The new stranger in town receives respect, but not for the quickness of his hand but the quickness of his dollar (and the Swedish gun he wears). In the settlement there are also the Chinese who work the mines, but them we have not yet seen. But, "Turn over a rock and you'll find a Chink." Thirty years later the western township houses a different "order": the businessman, the workers, and the immigrants (in Sheehan's hotel there is no Mexican band: a lone figure plays a balalaika-like instrument).

Shortly into the story (I am speaking of both films) a character appears who brings destiny. On a sunny afternoon a stage coach pulls into Tombstone and out comes a lady from the East looking for Doc Holliday. And on a similar afternoon in Presbyterian Church (only there is no sunshine and the roads are full of mud) comes a locomotive but not on tracks, a machine so loud and disturbing that even the Chinese come out (this is the first time we actually see their presence in the film) and out comes a lady from the East looking for McCabe. Only she's not looking for an ex-lover (though as in all good films somebody falls in love — or is it the last strain of nostalgia?) but the same card that kept McCabe in town. Mrs. Miller offers him a partnership (not too long before her arrival Sheehan also offered McCabe a deal which would prevent anyone from building anything in Presbyterian Church without first going through the two of them — in Tombstone Doc was just telling Wyatt that he and the marshals usually like to agree on certain town managing "protocol") and after successfully making him understand that "You have to spend money to earn money" McCabe accepts to invest in a first class bordello. And in Tombstone, Wyatt Earp was surely in love.

With the arrival of Mrs. Miller, the community rapidly begins to grow. On the same "coach" is Ida, a young woman arriving to marry one of the town's residents, Coyle, a marriage pre-arranged through a "pairing" agency. Shortly after, Mrs. Miller's ladies begin to arrive, along with the town's first black couple, Mrs. and Mr. Jefferson (on a once again not so sunny afternoon). In due time the town will also receive Sears and Hollander, representatives of the Harrison Shaunessy mining corporation, one of America's biggest industrialists. Being interested in Presbyterian Church's mining potentials, they offer to buy out all of McCabe's property. McCabe refuses, forcing them to leave without a deal. However, shortly after he realizes that he should not have refused (after Mrs. Miller explains to him the company's "getting rid off" policy). Fearing for his life he goes into the neighboring town to look for them; not being able to find them he looks for the sheriff but finds a lawyer instead. The latter offers to help him free of charge, speaking of the American justice which equally protects both the "big" and the "small". McCabe returns to Presbyterian Church to confront the three men "inquiring about Pudgy".

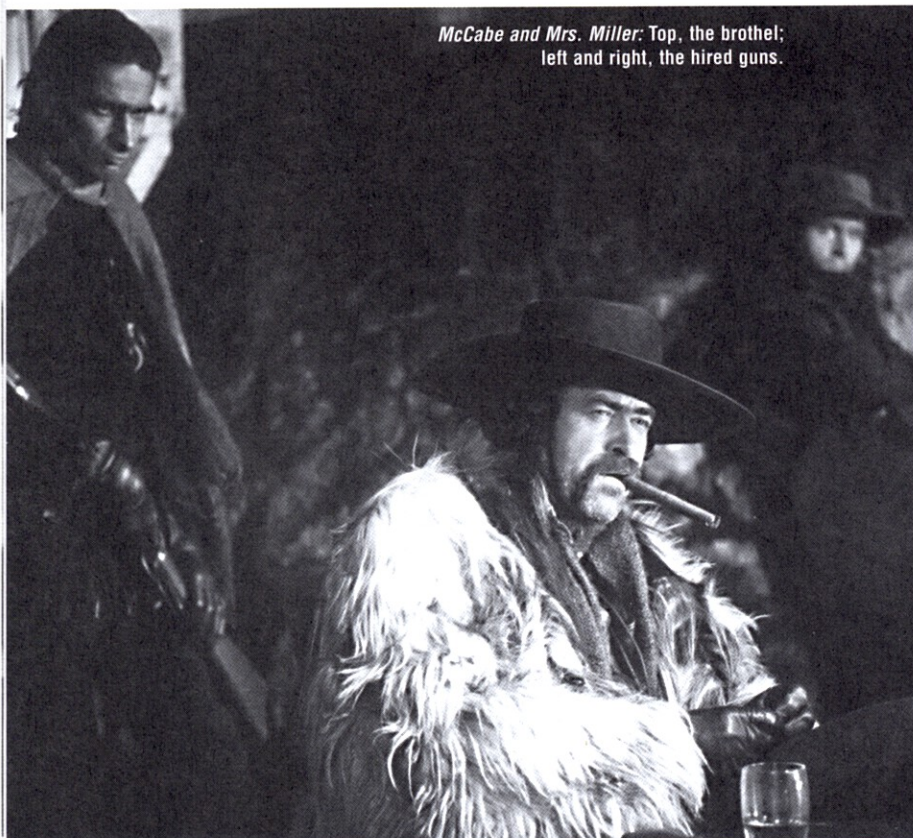
Thirty years ago time moved slower. Clementine came to town but only looked for the king of hearts. Doc Holliday is an interesting character: he is a highly cultured surgeon from



MCCABE and Mrs. Miller: Ida (Shelley Duvall), the mail order widow at her husband's funeral.



Boston who turned "wild" — his woman is now Chihuahua, a half-Indian saloon singer — but who can't seem to shake the civilization that pushes from behind). In Tombstone there were still the good and the bad, the heroes, the show-downs at the O.K. Corral. And sweet smelling lotions, and new barber chairs from Kansas City, and well mannered ladies from Boston made promising the time that was yet to come. "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," is a story about the coming of America: the one that really arrives; about time that becomes all too fast, even for those that try to play it. Opening up with a somewhat unordinary Western premise, the film establishes the existence of a class society. Inherent within its foundations are race, marriage, religion, and work. The town is a mining community whose population heavily consists of Chinese immigrants. Yet they are never shown except on the occasion when Mrs. Miller goes to their part of town to smoke opium. Quite openly, we are introduced to an early model of an American ghetto. The only integration that occurs is through a single Oriental female. However, she is a lady working in McCabe's brothel: the interaction is purely sexual, i.e., economic. Starting with Sheehan's comment ("Turn over a rock and you'll find a Chink"), the racism continues throughout. When the three men arrive looking for McCabe, one of them (Butler) discusses a more efficient method of mining. He explains how the Chinese are sent on suicidal errands but manage to detonate the explosive at strategic places. Their deaths never cause a problem since four out of five times the inspector reports them as accidents. In fact, in Presbyterian Church the Chinese seem to be the



McCabe and Mrs. Miller: Top, the brothel; left and right, the hired guns.



only ones working. The rest of the white working population spend their time in the saloon and the brothel.

The Jeffersons, the town's first black couple, live in the white part of town. They are well-dressed and apparently educated. However, they are completely isolated. Their interaction is limited to everyday polite greetings. Not once are they shown in the saloon or the brothel, the town's main social gatherings. When Coyle dies and the church is on fire they attend the funeral and help put out the fire. But their presence is purely physical. During the funeral they quietly stand on the side and when the church is saved they quickly disappear from the festivities.

The marriage of Coyle and Ida, with the exception of the Jeffersons, is the only one in town. It is not given much emphasis; we only learn that it is pre-arranged. Later, in a fight that ensues over a silly comment about Ida's presence at the brothel, Coyle is accidentally killed. Ida is left homeless without any means of supporting herself. Shortly after we find her with Mrs. Miller in the brothel, commenting that she never really liked sex but only did it because it was her duty. Mrs. Miller tells her that marriage and prostitution are similar things, women having to submit to either in order to keep a roof over their head. The only difference is that as a prostitute she gets to keep a little extra money for herself. Not only is the custom of marriage introduced as a pre-arranged, calculated economic affair (Ida being a "mail-order bride"), but institutionalized matrimony is made analogous with whoring.

As with most frontier settlements, the House of God seems to be a mandatory establishment. The town is even named Presbyterian Church (irony of ironies — this is perhaps the most biting parallel with *My Darling Clementine*). But, no viewer will forget that sunny Sunday morning when the bells toll in Tombstone (and no one remembers when they tolled last) and the God-respecting folk that gather around. Has a preacher ever been shown more amiably? "I read the Good Book from cover to cover and found no word agin dancing." And America is celebrated in good old frontier "dance me 'round the floor, want you" — on the foundations of an unfinished church. And Wyatt Earp, walking most magnificently with Clementine on his arm, is invited to dance the honorary dance: on a plateau of belief (that needs no roof), all around space and freedom, the East and West joined in embrace, glittering with the hope of morning sunlight. In Presbyterian Church the church has been finished. The preacher, alone, puts the cross on its roof (this is shot at a most beautiful moment, the sun setting down in the background — the entire film is most beautifully photographed — just as McCabe rides in with the three prostitutes he bought). However, up until the end of the film the church practically remains invisible, i.e., non-functional. The preacher (who practically lives sealed off in the church) is an unseemly figure whose presence evokes unease. On the occasions when he is amidst people he is utterly useless. During the argument that results in Coyle's death he is present. When Coyle falls, his head bleeding, everybody rushes to his help. Only the preacher quietly walks away. When Coyle is



McCabe (Warren Beatty) stalks the killers who are stalking him.

being buried he is there again: he offers no spiritual support; he stands beside the grave saying next to nothing. It is in fact the prostitutes who begin singing the funeral song. And in the end when McCabe seeks shelter in the church, hiding from Butler and his men, the preacher drives him out at gun point. Not serving any social purpose (let alone provide hope), the church is presented as a hollow icon, oblivious to human struggle.

Presbyterian Church is primarily interested in growth and development. When the town begins showing promising signs of material gain, the American corporation steps in. The possibility for larger investment is viable and thus they want to buy it out. But being rejected and not wanting to bother negotiating (and perhaps paying more) they decide to hire killers and solve the problem quicker. McCabe does go into the neighboring town looking for help, but he realizes that no one will help him: the lawyer only reads out of a book whose laws in reality mean nothing (the lawyer happens to be named Clement — failed enlightenment from the East?). He returns to Presbyterian Church awaiting a confrontation which he must resolve alone. Only this time the Clanton's haven't announced the showdown at the O.K. Corral. And no three men will walk down a hot, dusty street to bravely meet their foes.

Altman uses the situation to downplay the genre's expectations three times. On the first occasion a lone horseman

appears during Coyle's funeral. McCabe goes out to meet him, hand ready to draw, but he only encounters a naive-looking youthful "cowboy" eagerly anticipating a good time with the whores. On the second occasion McCabe goes out to meet Butler and his men. He is ridiculed and laughed at, the premise being set for the "hero" to make his stand. McCabe, however, walks away, saying that he is not carrying a gun after Butler threateningly tells him to leave before he "gets cross." The third instance is the most poignant and does not involve McCabe. Getting ready to leave town, the youthful cowboy heads over to Sheehan's establishment to purchase some provisions. He is confronted by one of Butler's men, an evil-looking blond teenager who just embarrassed himself by missing a shooting mark. He begins provoking the cowboy who responds by turning away. Not wishing to give up he inquires about his gun. The cowboy says that he doesn't know how to shoot and never uses it. Still persistently wanting to instigate trouble, he tells him that it just might be broken and that he should let him take a look at it. The cowboy naively reaches for his weapon while the other draws and kills him. The great western duel, its code of honour, is completed. In the presence of astonished onlookers the dead cowboy sinks through the ice of the frozen river. Nobody tries to make a stand. The ritual of western honor is made into a deceitful act of murder. The death is meaningless, but the world around is even more.

In the end, McCabe is forced to confront his pursuers. The morning is gray and it is snowing. Wading through it, the four men begin stalking one another. Rather unheroically, McCabe succeeds in killing two of them but is wounded along the way. After getting shot once more he kills Butler, too. In the meanwhile the church catches fire and the entire town rushes to its assistance. McCabe struggles to find shelter, but he falls into the snow. He freezes and dies. While the snow falls and the town's people celebrate an empty victory, Mrs. Miller lies in an opium den, lost in oblivion. And so the film ends.

Fifty years ago we believed in towns called Tombstone, in men that dealt unconditional justice, in half-Indian beauties singing in saloons, in showdowns at the O.K. Corral. Men like John Ford made us believe, and they imbued the coming tomorrow with the idealism of youth; idealism that causes films to be made. But idealism often fades as it proves to be slightly less ideal. I suppose that is often its consequence. And McCabe is already riding through a slightly post-ideal America. Perhaps in 1946 he would ride into Presbyterian Church and discover a small mining settlement, its methods old and de-modernized, and he would make an investment and the mine would begin increasing its productivity. The community would start developing, new settlers would arrive; businesses open, families form. Miss Miller arrives too, daughter of a successful merchant. She meets McCabe and they fall in love. Soon enough competition arrives and they try to push McCabe out. However, McCabe is an entrepreneur, skillful and experienced, and he wards off all attempts of sabotage. Yes, there is some trouble, but in the end the morally just win. The free market is celebrated, the

laissez-faire is proved to be efficient. McCabe and Miss Miller marry in the just completed church, the first couple to do so under its finished roof. And so the film would end.

My Darling Clementine is a voice of its present. As art so often cannot help but share the gust of the times (as it is most certainly meant to), *Clementine* corresponds with the mood of its era. And for a nation on a threshold of its as of yet most unprecedented incline the idealistic ideology of this film is most natural. Clementine's arrival (symbol of civilization) into the open frontier is the positive anticipation of the future's possibility (even Wyatt Earp's arrival in Tombstone as a cattle herder looking for new pastures is a sign of coming change). And the film's elements of the Wild West in fact are relics. The Clantons all lose their lives. Now, of course, they happen to be on the wrong side. But even if that was not the case the new perspective would have no place for them: Doc Holliday dies, the civilized man turned "wild". And so does Chihuahua, his hot-blooded mistress. The potential heroes of another scenario are now out of joint. For in the end, who remains? Clementine, who is staying behind to start a "school," and Wyatt Earp (who is leaving, but may return), who is in love. And the frontier into which he rides off already looks slightly less wild. Tombstone (ironically so called), is the name of a town that once upon a time was so, then, when the West was maybe really wild.

McCabe and Mrs. Miller, however, was not made in 1946. It was made thirty years later when the idealism of the golden era already began to prove bankrupt; when history could no longer house an ideology that the present did/could not support. And so Altman made a film of how the Wild West became America, a Wild West so stripped of its iconography that there aren't even any more cowboys. In fact, he made a film about America today, or, the Wild West that never existed. Ford's vision of a "civilized garden" is a corporate desert. The *laissez-faire* is not an idealized free market but the symptom of crime, murder, and deceit. The "idyllic" society of the West is plagued by racism, class hierarchy, violence, sex, drugs, the law of money. Under the premise of the historical he presents the foundations of American society as gone utterly degenerate. Church is a hollow symbol that contradicts its humanitarian presumptions. It remains blind to people's struggles who themselves are indifferent to its existence. Marriage is a financial commodity in which the woman is merely an object. Without a shelter of a patriarch she must resort to prostitution which in fact is more beneficial. Economy is built at the price of human exploitation as the America we are shown is not the America built by the great Anglo-Saxon but the ghettoized Chinese. Similarly, the black man was always an alien, no matter how educated and privileged. And the ideal of personal endeavor is precluded by the dominance of big business which was always lurking in the background, ready to assert its "democratic" might. What is written in the law books is only the hypocrisy of the nation. Thus even the violence is economically instigated. The once romantic western shoot-out is replaced by corporate killers stalking their prey.

McCabe is not a Western hero. He is just a man (a busi-





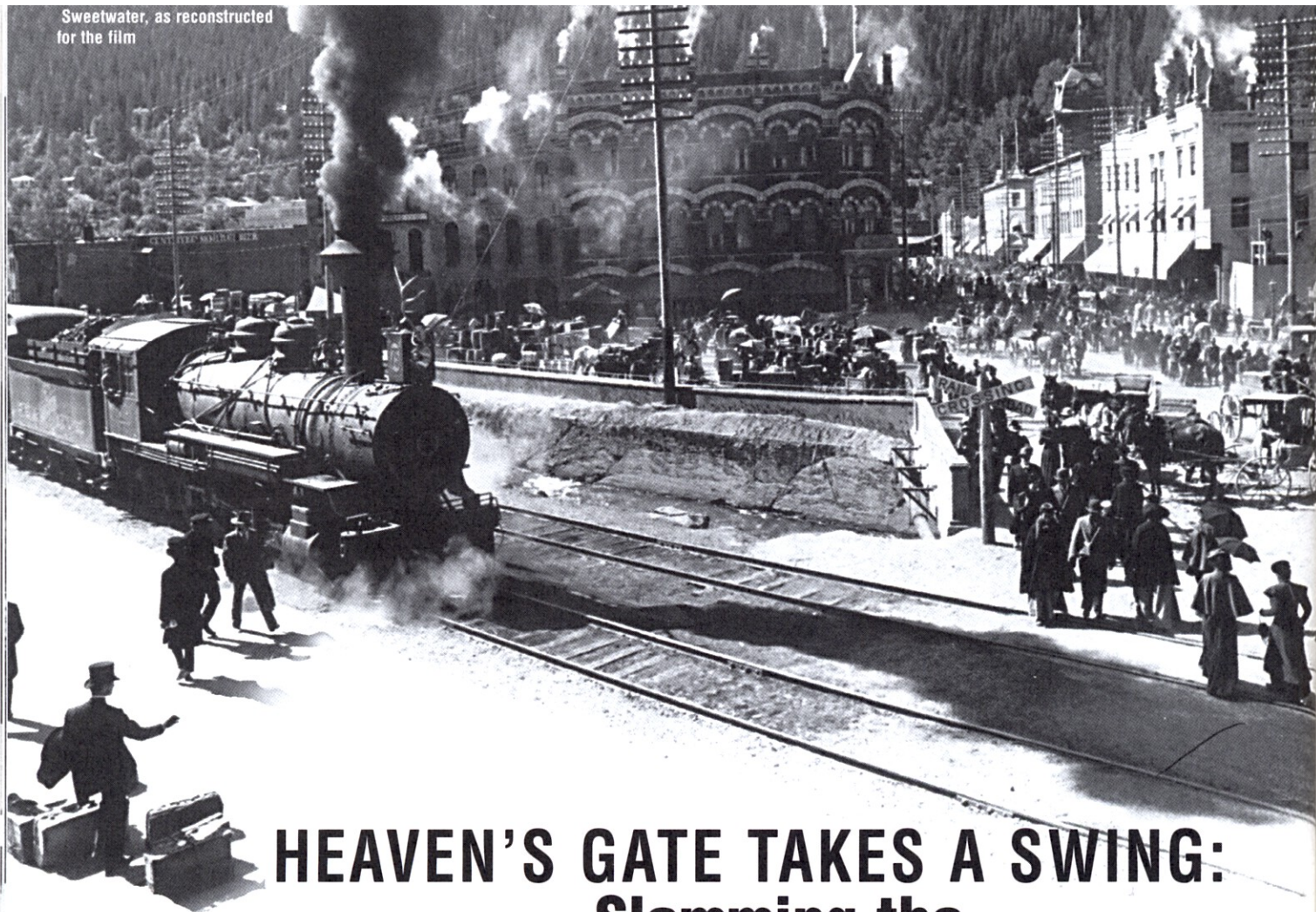
The church on fire.

nessman looking for his royal flush) struggling to survive as no one else will help him. Mrs. Miller is not a prostitute from the wild or the lady from the East (though, by all means, she is civilization). She is a woman with an eye for a dollar, selling her body for that seems to be her most profitable commodity. The "cowboy" is not Wyatt Earp. He just carries a gun which he cannot even use. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is not a Western. It is a historical shelter for an ideology. Only this time the ideology shatters the traditional role of the shelter. Perhaps it is so because now we are in the seventies. After the turmoil of the sixties and scandals of Vietnam America could not so easily continue its daydreaming. But whatever the case, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is an example of the revisionism of an ideological stance. It is the case of history demanding to re-examine itself as its explanations could not suffice the demands of the present. And so in the process it is re-written. Altman's use of the Western genre, i.e., referencing *My Darling Clementine*, is a way of presenting the fragility of "historical truths." Using the codes of a well-known language he succeeds in making his criticism more relevant. The fact

that westerns so often paint a radically different America only provides him with a stronger juxtaposition for re-interpretation. I still cannot help attaching some romanticism to his vision and imbuing it with a sense of nostalgia (a cry after the Wild West that maybe never was — Leonard Cohen's odes certainly add to it). After all, McCabe is only the innocent source of a community's initial growth for whose reckless development he pays with his life. And yet ironically, when the church starts burning, all the people rush to save it from its demise. It is as if now they remember the "past," the golden ideology dying inside. And so they save it. However, there is really nothing to save. What the church once provided was forsworn long ago (how long ago?). And McCabe is now dead. It is only a matter of time before the free-market returns to continue ... progress.

Ivan Yovanovich graduated from York University's Film Production in the year of 1996. Since then he has been mainly traveling.

Sweetwater, as reconstructed
for the film



HEAVEN'S GATE TAKES A SWING: Slamming the Capitalist Patriarchy


by Mickey Burns

The overwhelming amount of critical obsession with the narrative (or lack of it) in Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* indicates a sorry truth; that a great many of us want to be led by the hand, told up front what's happening and why, all without having to think. *Heaven's Gate* has almost unanimously been labelled incoherent, which means that which isn't logically connected or the inability to express oneself clearly, neither of which applies to the film.

It's true that the story does not unfold in the manner of classic Hollywood narrative and we are not told many things as quickly as we would like to be, some not at all, and it's only human to feel uncomfortable or even afraid of what you don't know. This must be the reason behind the addition of subtitles in the film's video release. They've obviously been put there (probably against Michael Cimino's wishes) to advance the narrative in a more traditional (translate: to provide clarity for those who otherwise might not understand it) manner. The most obvious example is in the scene when



The immigrants' emergency meeting in 'Heaven's Gate', the public forum (at left, Brad Dourif; right, Jeff Bridges).



James Averill/Kris Kristofferson is reading out the death list to the immigrants. Everyone is talking at once, shouting, whispering, with all of it meant to serve only as an ambient sound effect, when right out of nowhere the subtitle "That's Kovatch's widow" appears under a shot of that particular woman. Gimme a break. A flashing pointing arrow would have been less obvious.

One observation that can be made of the narrative is that it is secondary to the realism of the scenes. By this I mean the characters play out many of the scenes as they might take place in reality. For example: two people come together, they have a conversation complete with lengthy pauses, and since they know each other it's entirely possible, even likely, that they will never mention *how* they know each other. James' first meeting with Ella/Isabelle Huppert is an excellent example of such a scene. This realistic treatment might explain why *Heaven's Gate* received much more favourable reviews in Europe than it did in North America. Europeans are not only credited with the development of film realism, but also tend to have a finer appreciation of it as an art form. Enough said. With that I'd like to close the 'gate' on the discussion of narrative.

Heaven's Gate. Is it the passage into the west with all the richness of the western genre? Yes. Is it where the characters go to search for something better? Yes again. Immigrants hope for a better way of life by working the land, prostitutes hope for a better way of life by working the farmers, and classist, capitalist patriarchs come to exploit the land, the immigrants and the whores.

In *Heaven's Gate* the patriarchal Stock Growers Association maintains their control of the land/money/power by oppressing anyone other than themselves who tries to take a piece of the proverbial western pie. The more intense the efforts of the immigrants to make something for themselves, the more forcefully they are pushed back by the Stock Growers Association. Which leads me to the central political concerns of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*. The film systematically and thoroughly calls into question the classist, capitalist, patriarchal system in America by exposing the agenda of power-mongers through control by oppression; also by completely discrediting the patriarchal power-holders' claims of righteousness by revealing their ambivalence; and by making the immigrants sympathetic characters and allowing us to identify with them.

The film opens in 1870 at Harvard College, one of the cornerstones of all-male tradition. The film's very first shot starts at the top of Harvard's (phallic?) tower and then travels slowly down it. The sequence continues with the soon-to-be graduates marching to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. "Glory Glory Hallelujah/The Saints Go Marching On". Self-proclaimed Saints, destined to march over anyone in their way. As they march through the hallowed halls of Harvard to graduate, they pass through a tightly framed shot of a narrow doorway, flanked on both sides by rows of Harvard men. They then pass tightly through two upright pillars (erect penises?) suggesting their confinement and separateness, due to their class and their gender. As is true for all capitalist

patriarchs, they may be powerful, but it's a narrow (and shallow) world they live in.

The Reverend Doctor refers to the ceremony at hand as "sacred valedictory rights". Obviously sacred only to white men, as there are no Americans of alternative descent, and the women who are there as observers, never students, are always well-contained and separate from the men. They are shown watching from a high window, or from a high balcony. They're clearly presented as objects to be looked at — note James' gaze constantly wandering toward the beautiful girl.

It is in this sequence that the film meticulously sets up a challenge to the classist, capitalist, patriarchal institutions, a theme to be explored throughout the film. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Reverend Doctor's opening speech:

"It is not great wealth alone that builds the library, bounds the college. It is to diffuse a higher learning and culture among a people. It is the contact of the cultivated mind with the uncultivated. If it be true the constitution of American society is peculiarly hostile now to all habits of thought and meditation, it doubly behooves us to look well to the influence we may exert. My ideal, the education of a nation."

Exactly when the Reverend Doctor says "cultivated" it cuts to a close-up of James, who will later lead the assault on the Association. Exactly when he says "uncultivated" it cuts to a close-up of the beautiful girl, who, although the outward personification of cultivation, ultimately ends up symbolizing all that is uncultivated, even backward, and repulsive to James. Immediately following the Reverend Doctor's speech is that of the class orator, Billy Irvine/John Hurt:

"We must endeavor to speak to the best of our ability, but we must speak according to our ability ... We disclaim all intentions of making a change, in what we esteem, on the whole, well arranged."

Billy's speech foreshadows his political impotence, as well as the impotence of those he is characterized to represent — the vast majority of American society unwilling to challenge the status-quo. With the huge applause following his speech it is made clear that the majority agrees. The first speech is a message to James, who must do what he can, while the second is a sad prediction of Billy's inability to do anything other than recite doggerel. It's no mistake that he's the class (also meaning privileged) orator.

At the end of the ceremony when the graduates are fighting for a piece of the wreath on the tree, some of them are shown forming two circles and running around the tree (yet another penis?) in opposite directions protecting that which is sacred to them. This scene is exactly duplicated by the National Guard's entrance into the final battle scene. They, on their horses, form two circles and ride around in opposite directions protecting the Association's members, excuse the pun. The connection is obviously intentional as both are in long shot from above, and more importantly, it is James who leads the offence against them in both.

Money, one of the classic phallic symbols, and of the utmost importance to capitalist patriarchs, is central to the

power-struggle of *Heaven's Gate*. In each of the four main characters, the central focus is money. James has it as birthright and uses it to buy things for Ella (or buy Ella). Money and all that it represents is the wall that ultimately comes between them. Ella makes lots of money (note the constant reference to her doing her books), and the more she acquires the more she feels as if she's getting ahead. Nate is also trying to secure a place for himself by killing for the Association and earning a great deal of cash in the process. And Canton/Sam Waterston, the personification of patriarchy, has money and power and is obsessed with keeping it from the immigrants. Which brings us to how money, or lack of it, relates to the immigrants. The passionate speech of the young Russian man who persuades the immigrants to fight the Association sums up the idea perfectly:

"They [the rich] are opposed to anything that would settle and improve things in this country. Or try to make it more than cow pasture for Eastern speculators. They advance the idea that poor people have nothing to say in the affairs of this country."

To anyone who has ever said that *Heaven's Gate* is incoherent, I direct their attention to the three speeches highlighted so far. In them are the political concerns of the entire film. The violent oppression by capitalist patriarchs, the need to challenge that oppression, the unwillingness of the vast majority to take up such a challenge, and a plea to those who *are* willing to challenge, to not give up. The only thing that literally borders on incoherent is the above speech, due to the man's limited English. However, it's highly symbolic of the limited voice of the immigrants and an early model perhaps to Smiley in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* — another character with a real speech impediment who symbolizes a silenced political voice.

Although the immigrants were indeed stealing the odd cow to feed their starving families, the courts of Johnson County had yet to convict anyone of cattle thieving. The Association's reaction (taking the law into their own hands and planning to kill the immigrants for stealing the Association's cattle for food) equates to the white man's owning of slaves. They use the poor to work the land, deny them the right to an education, the right to vote, and even the right to the basic necessities of life, such as food. All are tools of oppression with the purpose of maintaining power and control. The patriarchy's usual tactics are much more passive-aggressive, like organized religion or so-called democracy: religion giving the illusion of safety, and democracy (not in theory but in its current practice) giving the illusion of free choice. Both are tools used to perpetuate a system that empowers a rare few. The Association's declaration of war on the immigrants is a refreshingly overt example of the capitalist patriarchal agenda of oppression. Kudos to Michael Cimino for blatantly exposing what is often hidden.

When the death list (names of immigrants on the Association's hit list) is initially presented to the members of the Association, Canton states that the plan has the "whole-hearted" support of the Governor, the Senate, the House of

Representatives and the President. "If we fail, the flag of the United States fails," says Canton. It is in this scene that the Association and its intentions are clearly aligned with the entire government of the United States. So now, everything said thus far about the Association also applies to the U.S. government: The intention of *Heaven's Gate* is to present the government of the United States as a classist, capitalist, patriarchal organization with an agenda to retain the wealth and power among an elite group, who in 1890 actually were all white men of privilege, whereas today it is simply *controlled* by white men of privilege.

The film also makes it clear that none of this governmental support is in writing — no legal warrants were issued for the immigrants on the death list. Once again we witness the power of the patriarchy swiftly obliterating its perceived threats. It's at this point that the Association is revealed to be a mere pawn of a much bigger plan. When organized, the immigrants can fight the Association and do, but the battlefield is not even. When the immigrants actually start to win the battle, the National Guard steps in with the pretence of "arresting" the Association's men. It's an aggressive move by an enemy (the government) that denies it is even fighting. It's impossible to fight an enemy that denies its own existence — a wonderful example of the passive-aggressive tools mentioned earlier. (Note the incredible "park scene" in *JFK* with Kevin Costner and Donald Sutherland — a later attempt by Oliver Stone to expose the illusion of complete non-involvement as the government's most powerful weapon and defence mechanism.) In the middle of the battle, Billy says "They're not like the Indians. You can't just kill them all." And earlier in the film John/Jeff Bridges expresses the same sentiment about the Association's hit list, "My God, that's everybody in the county. How can people declare war on the whole county?" With exactly the passive-aggressive tactics mentioned above.

Having outlined the Association's agenda, let's move to discussing how the film reveals the Association's (and patriarchy's) ambivalence. Let's start by applying a simple psychoanalytic theory: Those who feel or perceive themselves to be threatened when they are not, are usually those who are most emotionally insecure. It follows that the deeper the insecurities, the more intense the reactionary tactics used to neutralize the perceived threat and ensuing overwhelming feelings of insecurity. Therefore the Association (read patriarchy), who really has the most to give, feels as if it has the most to lose, because of individual and collective white male insecurity. If one were to measure insecurity by that which one has but is afraid to share, the patriarchy is the most threatened group in existence, not only in the film but in reality today. And if their insecurities are also measured by the size of their efforts to maintain control, then their fear becomes pathetically obvious, yet no less frustrating for those struggling against it.

An excellent example is when one of the gunmen hired by the Association shoots the train station worker who tries to warn the immigrants of the coming attack. The gunman shoots him with relish, five times at close range, all the while

his horse is jumping around like a trick pony. It's very much like the scene in John Ford's *The Searchers*, where Ethan/John Wayne shoots out the eyes of the dead Indian, smiling and twirling his gun like a trick shooter taking pleasure in his stunts. Both scenes represent an externalization of intense inner fear and turmoil.

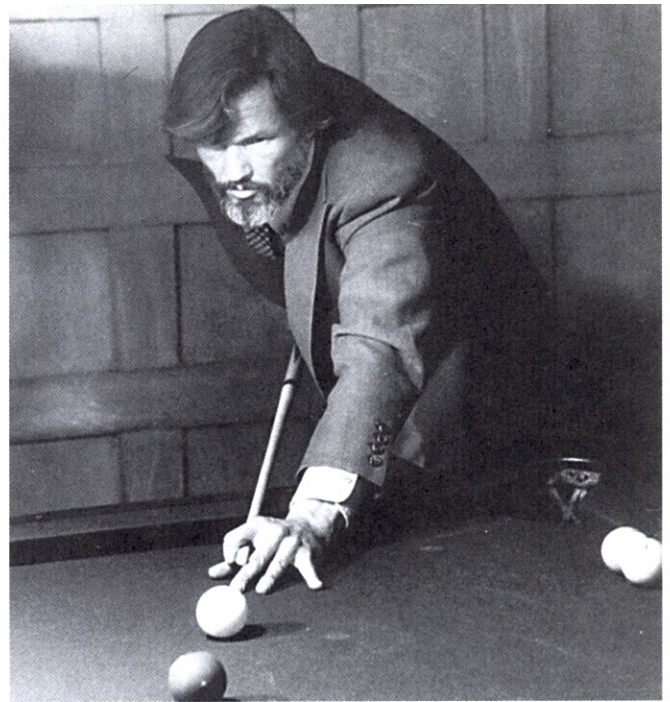
Although it's frightening (as it's meant to be) to consider that this level of reactionary violence is used by the patriarchy simply to offset feelings of insecurity, it's important to note that it's happened throughout history, and can, and will, happen again in our lifetimes.

A historical example of the patriarchy's intense reactions is the Salem Witch Hunts. Pagan women were practising alternative methods of healing, thereby threatening traditional medicine, one of the most powerful patriarchal organizations in existence. These women were burned at the stake. A second example is the Klu Klux Klan, who felt so threatened and insecure that it was necessary for them to not only burn their perceived enemies, but to attack at night, wearing masks. A third example is the Nazis' "ethnic cleansing", a blatant example of the need to wipe out a perceived threat in order to cover up intolerable insecurities. (Note that one of the biggest psychological burdens of Holocaust survivors is crippling amounts of shame, due to the fact that they feel they didn't resist when they should have, adopting roles of submission in order to survive. The instilling of shame is yet another act of aggression that further silences the oppressed.)

Having noted the above examples, it can be said that *Heaven's Gate*, by presenting patriarchal insecurities and their ensuing tactics to feel some relief, takes its cue from history. These issues are not only presented within the film as a whole, but also within its main characters.

If James Averill is the personification of classist internal conflict, then Billy Irvine represents the pathetic result of an inability to challenge. He's entirely ineffective and politically impotent, symbolizing the same sub-conscious feelings of powerlessness and impotence of the Association as a whole. Which brings us to the scene where men, hired by the Association to kill Ella, rape her. Rape is not a sex act, but an act of violent rage fueled by the desperate need to feel powerful, which in turn is caused by a humiliating feeling of powerlessness. What better way for the film to further demonstrate the vast insecurities of the patriarchy than to portray them as rapists? Rape has been a war tactic since time immemorial. It's the ultimate power-grab, the ultimate degradation, and psychologically a very effective way of rendering your enemies helpless as a result of their shame.

It's Canton who brings the internal conflict of the oppressors to a personal level. At first glance he seems entirely unsympathetic, and for the most part this is true. But there are several moments when he reveals his own distaste for what he is doing. In the beginning, when the Association is taking a vote to see who is in favour of the plan, Billy speaks against it and then exits the room. Canton watches him leave, and it is perfectly clear by the look on his face that there is a part of him that agrees with Billy. As the members of the Association each vote in favour of the plan, Canton's eyes stay



Top: James Averill (Kris Kristofferson) in the Association's club.
Middle: Ella (Isabelle Huppert) with Averill after the rollerskating.
Bottom: The train that carries Averill (in comfort) and immigrants (on the roof) to Sweetwater.

lowered throughout, a classic stance of shame and submission. It is by no means liberating to be an oppressor, and like so many individuals and organizations trapped in that patriarchal role, he can not or will not question his own actions, let alone instigate challenge. Once again the film calls patriarchy into question, yet here it doesn't come from the mouths of the oppressed, but from the head of the Association. Canton, although uncomfortable with his mission, is in no way capable of questioning it and proceeds to carry it out with precision.

When Nate Champion/Christopher Walken finally comes to challenge the Association and states that they'd better have a warrant for every name on the death list, Canton replies with:

"My Grandfather was the secretary of war to Harrison, his brother was a Governor of the state of New York, my brother-in-law is the secretary of state, and to you I represent the full authority of the government of the United States and the president."

Talk about the ultimate patriarchal pedigree. When Canton tries to show Nate his power and courage, his act of aggression is really an incredible act of cowardice. Canton, with fifty of his own men behind him, shoots a non-aggressive man who is tied-up. He once again reveals his subconscious conflict the moment before the Association's men massacre Nate. Canton's nervousness and insecurity are beautifully conveyed by Sam Waterston in the slightest of facial expressions. Canton is finally killed in the end by James, but it's no consolation, as we've been shown all along that Canton was only the cowardly pawn of a much more powerful entity.

Of course the question begging to be asked of all this is obvious: Of what interest is this struggle to Michael Cimino? In an attempt to answer this question, it's interesting to note that Cimino, in a 1977 interview, revealed "When I was growing up I had a number of very close friends who were Russian Jews. I was influenced a great deal by them."¹ Cimino, educated at private schools and from a well-off family, also stated:

"[I] was always hanging around with kids my parents didn't approve of. Those guys were so alive ... There was such passion and intensity about their lives. When the rich kids got together, the most we ever did was cross against a red light."²

James, like Cimino, is a member of his class by right of birth, yet drawn to the vitality of the immigrants. Since *Heaven's Gate* was a long cherished project of Cimino's, and written by him, I suggest the link of Cimino's own feelings toward the oppressed with those of James Averill. When James, while playing pool, confronts Billy about the death list, James asks "What will you do Billy?" Billy replies "I'm a victim of our class, James." A truer statement couldn't have been made, for the privileged *are* victims of their own system, constantly propelled to defend that which they know to be at best boring and at worst morally corrupt.

It can be said that the military is a valid example of this

kind of "chosen" compliance, the ultimate organization where blind obedience is one of the most rewarded qualities. (Note the film *Forrest Gump* in which Forrest/Tom Hanks has an I.Q. of 75, far below normal and way below the standard set for entry to grade school, but who, later in the film, turns out to be exceptionally qualified as a soldier in the U.S. army.)

In *Heaven's Gate* this excuse of 'just following orders' is exposed in the scene where the captain of the National Guard says he can't act on James' request to assemble his men and stand on guard because "It's not me, you understand, it's the rules." In the final battle when the captain brings in the National Guard to arrest (read save) the members of the Association, he once again says "I told ya Jim, it's not me that's doin' it to ya, it's the rules." He too, a pawn of patriarchy, is trapped in a role he does not agree with but does not wish to challenge. And that's how all oppression perpetuates itself, by instilling fear in its victims and pawns, and by rewarding compliance. In this way the oppressed as well as the oppressors maintain the status quo to the benefit of an elite few. The captain also says "You can't force salvation on people Jim, it doesn't work." This statement is particularly true when applied to the captain himself.

Take a Picture, It Lasts Longer

The rollerskating sequence in *Heaven's Gate* is one of the most passionate, emotional and memorable moments on film I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Since film is so often used as escapist entertainment, it's no surprise that one of *Heaven's Gate's* most wonderful parts is pure utopian fantasy. It is here that the film presents the idea of a community in which all are welcome and equal, Ella as whore, James representing white-male privilege, and the immigrants, all happily co-existing, many literally arm in arm. However, at precisely the moment James joins the skaters, the film turns sepia. (Sepia is a photographic technique used to aesthetically treat prints so that they look "antiqued" and more like the brown-tones of early photography.) The end of the sequence when James says "I'm askin' ya to leave Ella," is precisely when the sepia tint ends.

Photographs capture a moment in time and freeze it forever, and this is constantly referred to in the film. First, there is the constant cutting to the picture of James and the beautiful girl, a time James often admits to being carefree. Second, when James is playing pool with Billy, the film cuts to an old class picture while they both refer to the carefree "old days". Third, there is the photographer from St. Louis in town to take pictures of the townspeople (as well as visit Ella's brothel). The film uses photography to highlight happy, carefree moments and to underline the fact that they can only last in memory, not in reality. Which is why the rollerskating sequence becomes sepia when James enters. He, trapped by his class, will only happily co-exist with the immigrants and Ella for this brief moment. The poignant sadness of Ella and James' private waltz, particularly enhanced by the music, adds to the surreal quality of the sequence.

Before continuing to discuss the role of music in the film, it's important to say that music, as an art form, is one of the



The rollerskating sequence. The boy fiddler (who can fiddle and rollerskate simultaneously) is David Mansfield, composer/arranger of the film's magnificent score.

purest creative products of human imagination. It by-passes one of our most limiting tools of expression, words. Music is intuitive, instinctive and extremely emotional. Robin Wood in his article "Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema" states:

"As Richard Dyer has argued (*Entertainment and Utopia*, *Movie* 24), it is often the function of musical numbers (enabled precisely by the breach with realism and all pretense of verisimilitude) to express the utopian desire the characters cannot fulfill in their lives."³

Although this quotation refers to the more traditional "Hollywood" musical numbers, I think it applies here because the music is used for the same utopian purpose, and in the rollerskating sequence, the music is actually performed by characters in the film, rather than simply used as soundtrack. Note that David Mansfield's beautiful music exclusively scores the scenes with the immigrants — another example of how our sympathies are being directed.

The very next scene after the rollerskating sequence is

1. John Andrew Gallagher, "Michael Cimino" in *Film Directors on Directing* (New York: Praeger Publishers), pp. 37.
2. "Cimino, Michael" in *World Film Directors Volume Two 1945-1980* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1988), pp. 214.
3. Robin Wood, "Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema" in *CineAction* No. 32, pp. 87.



Nate's first scene with Ella. It's clear that Nate is the only man she can truly be "with" for he is not separated from her by class, he too is an immigrant. This is ultimately proven true when in the end, James, an "Eastern speculator", is wealthy and on a yacht in Newport, Rhode Island. You can't get much further East and still be in America. He's also in the same outfit he was wearing in the old photograph of himself and the beautiful girl (now his wife), white pants and a dark jacket. She is also in the same outfit as in the photograph, a white dress. James has come full circle and now he's right back where he started, trapped in a position of privilege, and in pain, as is evident from his facial expression. He's destined to live in denial, as does any conscious person whose existence is dependent on the oppression of others. Leading a privileged life based on exploitation is really no life at all. In fact it's quite lifeless. Just look at his wife, hardly "alive", propped on white silk cushions, looking like a corpse in a casket.

Cocks, Whores and Slaves

The cock fight is one of the film's more obvious symbols of conflict. White cock against black cock with the white symbolizing the immigrants (note it continues to put up a good fight after being badly hurt), and the black cock representing oppression. I find it hilarious that a film concerned with exploring patriarchy presents conflict in the form of a "cock" fight.

In the actual conflict between the government and the immigrants, it's important to note that the immigrants aren't just buying parcels of land from the government, they're buying a dream from wealthy capitalists. The conflict escalates as the immigrants become aware of the fact that they're being exploited by the powerful elite.

When we first see the immigrants they are travelling on top of the train while James takes his seat of privilege in a car. As the man at the train station first tells James:

"I tell ya, every new citizen takes up land here, the big fellas black-ball him. Citizen steals to keep his family from starving, they trade him off or kill him. I tell ya Jim, if the rich could hire others to do their dyin' for them the poor could make a wonderful livin'."

And as one woman at the train station shouts while her husband is being beaten, "And you call this a free country!" The immigrants were lured with the promise of freedom and given the most difficult task of settling the land. Some resort to stealing cattle simply to keep from starving and are then held accountable for crimes the system forced them into. It's a perfect parallel to how African Americans have been systematically excluded and then held solely accountable for crimes of frustration and anger. In fact, the immigrants in *Heaven's Gate* are often paralleled to slaves — the top of the train is the equivalent to the back of the bus.

At this point, it's worth introducing another film that dared to expose patriarchal ambivalence (and was also critically panned), *Mandingo*. Similar to the slave procession in *Mandingo* when Ham is leading the slaves off to be sold, the

immigrants in *Heaven's Gate* are shown trudging cross country on foot with their belongings on their backs. The *Heaven's Gate* scene of the women working in place of oxen is another example — slaves to the land which is controlled by the Association. In *Mandingo* there is much contempt for Cicero, who preaches freedom and advocates revolt, as in *Heaven's Gate* there is much contempt for James who helps the resistance. In the end it's Nate who shows the ultimate resistance by shooting a member right in the Association's own tent, much like Mem, the "house nigger" shooting the patriarch in *Mandingo* (perhaps also foreshadowing Mookie/Spike Lee throwing the garbage can in *Do The Right Thing*?) And we all know there's nothing worse than a slave who craves freedom ... well, except for maybe a woman who wants liberation.

Which brings us to James' love for Ella, much like Ham's love for Ellen in *Mandingo*: both men are kind of "slumming", but still in control because of their position. Although Ella does not take money from James each time she has sex with him, we eventually learn that she has indeed been prostituting herself because she's still paying off James for her land and his initial protection.

I think it's important here to mention how crucial it is for a slave/immigrant to adopt a role of submission. By doing so they are safer, and are better compensated than those who revolt. Mem, in *Mandingo*, gets better food, shelter, accommodation and treatment than the others. In *Heaven's Gate* when Nate adopts his role of submission, it eliminates him as a threat to the Association, and in turn pays him well. But the price he pays is to help further the classist, capitalist patriarchal cause. However, I think it's important to note Nate obviously does not enjoy what he is doing whereas Ella and the other women are always shown to be enjoying their work. Nate Champion is the second whore in *Heaven's Gate*, another reason why Ella is destined to choose him.

The wallpaper scene between Ella and Nate is powerfully emotional and one of the most romantic scenes known to me. It's excruciating to watch how vulnerable Nate is, how much he loves Ella, and how much he's aware his "wallpaper" (really newspaper) can never measure up to James' gift of a horse and rig. As we watch Ella, all of this passes through her mind, and as she wipes a tear and turns to Nate, we know, as does she, that Nate is the real hero, complete with the last name "Champion." The silence in this scene is more powerful than any dialogue could ever hope to be. Christopher Walken's performance here conveys volumes without his saying a word.

In contrast to Ella's relationship with Nate, is her relationship with James. When Ella tries to pay James what she owes him, she explains to him that she can't leave, everything in the world she has is here, and says to him "You'll never understand," James replies "Christ, the piety of a whore," and then tells her that piety means dumb. In that one exchange they both express what neither has said until now. James, whether he likes it or not, ultimately thinks of her as a dumb whore and she in turns knows that's how he feels. Ella has always made Nate pay for sex, and it's a far more even exchange than

the one between her and James. In the end newspapered walls are worth more than a thousand fancy rigs.

The entire triangle between James, Nate and Ella is a more personal portrayal of the political concerns of the film. James represents patriarchal privilege, Nate initially represents its pawns, and Ella (and later Nate) represent those who resist.

At the end of the film, after Nate has been murdered by the Association, when Ella has no choice but to go with James, she's all in white, and he's in a formal black suit. They stand arm in arm as if at the altar to be married, and Ella is suddenly shot and killed, along with John/Jeff Bridges, in a surprise attack by the Association. As has been expressed throughout the film, James cannot be with Ella because he is destined to be trapped by his privileged position in life.

As for the film's portrayal of Ella, it is an accurate political reflection of Cimino's time. *Heaven's Gate* was released in 1980 — the end of the progressive seventies and beginning of the reactionary eighties. Ella is portrayed as a well-rounded, independent, sexually free woman, capable of loving more than one man. And she is killed for it. Exactly like Diane Keaton's character in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, another film of the seventies that shows how sexually independent women are often punished, even killed. Robin Wood states in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*:

"What possibilities exist for a female (not necessarily feminist) discourse to be articulated within a patriarchal industry through narrative conventions and genres developed by and for a male-dominated culture? The closure of classical narrative (of which the Hollywood happy ending is a typical form) enacts the restoration of patriarchal order; the transgressing woman is either forgiven and subordinated to that order, or punished, usually by death."⁴

Heaven's Gate and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* have the intelligence to show these deaths as tragedies; however if you look ahead to the most popular films of the eighties, this is sadly no longer the case. Susan Faludi's book *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women* says it all:

"Punch the bitch's face in," a moviegoer shouts into the darkness of the Century 21 Theater, as if the screenbound hero might hear, and heed, his appeal. "Kick her ass," another male voice pleads from the shadows. The theater in suburban San Jose, California, is stuffy and cramped, every seat taken, for this Monday night showing of *Fatal Attraction* in October 1987. The story of a single career woman who seduces and nearly destroys a happily married man has played to a full house here every night since its arrival six weeks earlier. "Punch the bitch's lights out! I'm not kidding," a man up front implores actor Michael Douglas. Emboldened by the chorus, a man in the back row cuts to the point: "Do it, Michael. Kill her already. Kill the bitch." ... "I don't get it really," says Sabrina Hughes, a high school student who works the Coke machine and finds the adults' behaviour "very weird." "Sometimes I like to sneak into the theater in the last twenty minutes of the movie. All these men are screaming, 'Beat that bitch! Kill her off now!' The women, you never hear them say anything. They are all just sitting there, real quiet."⁵

Women were still being killed off in the eighties, but thanks to some brilliantly subliminally, misogynous screen-writing, at least these bitches deserved it. But the ultimate patriarchal coup of the eighties came in the form of the multi-billion dollar box-office smash hit *Pretty Woman*. The whore who doesn't really want to be a whore is rescued by the very rich, very white, very male, head of a billion dollar corporation. Talk about the ultimate capitalistic patriarchal dream come true. He gets the cash, gets the whore all to himself, redeems her and everybody lives happily ever after.

In 1980 *Heaven's Gate* was the property of United Artists, which at the time was the property of TransAmerica, a huge conglomerate that owned everything from insurance companies to Budget Rent-A-Car.⁶ TransAmerica was exactly the kind of institution that *Heaven's Gate* was condemning. Michael Cimino was trying to make a movie that slammed patriarchy, yet he had to work within the parameters of the system. He was dependent on it for financing, creative approval and for distribution. As an advertising executive I know once said, "It's like trying to do ballet in a phone booth."

The Johnson County war in *Heaven's Gate* prophesied the reactionary backlash decade of the eighties and was therefore, along with Michael Cimino, among the first to receive the full brunt of that reactionary effort. This is evident from TransAmerica's and the media's systematic silencing of the film's voice of revolutionary change. Be it conscious or not (I believe that the backlash effort is almost entirely on a sub-conscious level, making it that much harder to combat), I doubt that the power-players of TransAmerica could possibly release and support a film like *Heaven's Gate*. In fact, at the time, I wonder how many Harvard men were employed at TransAmerica.

When the woman at the end of the battle shoots herself, the *Blue Danube* (which is the music of the initial waltz scene at Harvard) is playing in the background signifying hopelessness, finality and complete domination as the capitalist patriarchal order is victorious and restored. However, if the revolutionary ideal is to never *stop* questioning, then it is here, at the end of the film, with no hope left, that perhaps *Heaven's Gate* fails. It would have made more sense to have someone — anyone — left in a position to be able to continue the resistance. Michael Cimino would certainly soon *not* be.

Cut to eighteen years later and *Heaven's Gate* gets two thumbs up for giving patriarchy the finger. And as Nate Champion says in reference to the president of the United States, "Fuck him too."

Mickey Burns is an advertising copywriter and amateur film critic who, before meeting Robin Wood, believed the only good western was one that came toasted with a side of fries.

4. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 209.

5. Susan Faludi, *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 112.

6. Stephen Bach, *Final Cut* (New York: Outpost Productions Inc., 1985), pp. 24.

I like to regard the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' decision to award the Oscar for Best Picture of 1992 to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* as one of the few occasions during the nineties that the Academy actually managed to recognize the most deserving film, among those nominated.

The following article is best described as a collaborative effort — it reflects five years worth of personal consideration of the strengths of this film, and is influenced by the ideas of several people whom I wish to acknowledge here. Richard Simister drew my attention to the fact that the film's climactic shoot-out can read simultaneously as both disturbing and hilarious. My friends Dougal Haggart, John King, and Marie Zernask helped me to formulate my ideas concerning Little Bill's/Gene Hackman's function in the film, whereas my friend Jean Saindon shared his insights concerning *Unforgiven's* relationship to popular Western Mythology

by **Peter E.S. Babiak**

REWRITING REVISIONISM: Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*

Clint Eastwood directs.



with me. I am most indebted to Richard Lippe for allowing me to attend his lecture of July 1997 in which he dealt with *Unforgiven*, for allowing me to participate in the following class discussion, and for privately discussing the film with me on several occasions. The ideas of all of the aforementioned people are reflected in this article, and to them I offer my thanks.

If one considers the Academy's track record in acknowledging ground-breaking films (*Citizen Kane*, *Vertigo*, *Blade Runner*, and *Do The Right Thing* were not given the Best-Picture Oscar in the years of their respective releases) the decision to recognize *Unforgiven* seems all the more remarkable, for *Unforgiven* represents the emergence of a new sub-genre in American Western mythology, which I prefer to call the Post-Revisionist Western. The Classical Hollywood Western, as epitomized by films such as Ford's *My Darling Clementine* or DeMille's *Union Pacific*, tends to ascribe the community's potential for positive moral growth to established social institutions, such as "The Law" or "Big Business". For example, Tombstone establishes a church and a school while being purged of the Clantons, and the wilderness is tamed through the completion of the transcontinental railroad. The Revisionist Western of the sixties and seventies tended to reverse the roles of the players while preserving the notion of a moral universe. Thus, Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* shows how the town of Sweetwater is established and nurtured through the efforts of two outlaws and a prostitute in preventing the railroad company from demolishing the proposed town. The Classical Western tradition, then, tends to portray those aligned with traditional positions of power and authority as morally positive, whereas the Revisionist Western tends to portray those aligned with what is considered to be the underbelly of Western life as morally positive. Common to both the Classical and the Revisionist Western is the notion that an objective standard of morality does exist, and that the actions of a character may be assessed by examining their relationship to that objective standard. As Wyatt Earp, Henry Fonda is clearly the protagonist of *My Darling Clementine*, is clearly aligned with traditional authority (as represented by his position of Marshall), and is clearly chivalrous in his behavior toward Clementine. As Frank, Henry Fonda is just as clearly the antagonist of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, is just as clearly aligned with traditional authority (as represented by the fact that he is an employee of the railroad), and just as clearly murders an unarmed five-year-old boy in cold blood at the beginning of the film. Although here I am admittedly oversimplifying some seventy years of cinematic history, I believe the Classical Hollywood Western and the Revisionist Western both reflect a similar moral order, and that the chief difference between them tends to lie in which socio-economic class they portray as being aligned with this order. Even Costner's *Dances With Wolves*, released in 1990, is still possessed of this moral certainty. The Lakota, who value culture and community, are clearly "good" First Nations people — whereas the Pawnee, who scalp, murder, and raid, are clearly "bad" First Nations people. Similarly, Dunbar, who tolerates difference and opens

himself to the experience of the Lakota community, is clearly a "good" white man — whereas the other soldiers, who want to destroy the Lakota community, are clearly "bad" white men.

Conversely, *Unforgiven* refuses to provide us with any clear moral viewpoint from which the actions of any of its characters may be assessed. Although the film asks us to identify and sympathize with several of its characters — most notably Will/Clint Eastwood, Ned/Morgan Freeman, Davey/Rob Campbell, the Schofield Kid/Jaimz Woolvet, and Delilah/Anna Thomson — our identification and ability to sympathize with these characters is made problematic by the moral ambivalence of the universe that the film depicts. Will is perhaps the character with whom the film asks us to identify most strongly, yet the climax of the film proves him to be the most ruthlessly efficient killer that *Unforgiven* presents us with. Ned is presented as supportive and committed in his friendship to Will, yet his irresponsible adultery at Greeley's Saloon leaves Will at the mercy of Little Bill. Davey initially attempts to defend Delilah against Quick Mike's/David Mucci's attack, and later expresses remorse and regret for her suffering — but like Little Bill tends to characterize the attack on Delilah as an issue of "damaged goods", and by means of apology offers up a pony in exchange for his small part in Delilah's mutilation. The Schofield Kid also displays remorse and pain over his murder of Quick Mike; however, the Schofield Kid is also associated with Will — who is shown by the film as perfectly capable of extreme violence in the present despite his deep regret for the violence he has committed in the past. As Will's associate, and as the film aligns the Schofield Kid with Will in other significant ways, there is an implicit understanding that the Schofield Kid will probably kill again. Finally, although Delilah might seem the only completely blameless character in the film, she does nurse Will back to health after he is beaten by Little Bill, and does provide Will, Ned, and the Schofield Kid with supplies. Because of this intervention on her part, the trio is able to proceed to the murder of Davey. Delilah is therefore complicit in the violence that follows the interlude in the high country. *Unforgiven's* sheer refusal to allow us to neatly categorize the behavior of its characters against the objective code of moral behavior that the Classical and the Revisionist Western provide us with leads me to consider *Unforgiven* as belonging to a genre separate from these, which depicts a universe in which notions of morality are ambivalent, situational, and subjective.

"It's just that we both got scars..."

Although ostensibly a vengeance Western, *Unforgiven* also presents us with one of the most touching and tender scenes that I have ever seen in a Western — the scene in which Delilah expresses her sexual desire for Will. Will declines Delilah's offer but at the same time deepens the emotional bond between them, by explaining to her that he is motivated out of his love for his wife. Will's rejection of Delilah's offer of sex takes place in a world in which women are considered sexual objects and in which sexual intercourse is con-

sidered a barometer of masculine prowess. The affiliation of Will and Delilah here represents a bond formed between them based on their common experience as human beings. As Will's strongest motivation here is an expression of love and fidelity to his late wife, the film is using this scene to indicate the possibility of genuine love for and affiliation with other human beings in this world. Although the majority of the male characters in the film are motivated by the need to assert their masculinity, Will's act of self-abnegation in suppressing his desire for Delilah because of his love for his late wife suggests that there are other possibilities in this universe.

This behavior contrasts sharply with the bulk of masculine behavior that is depicted in the film. Indeed, the action of the film is entirely precipitated by a gratuitous act of violent masculine ego-assertion — the mutilation of Delilah by Quick Mike. We are told that Delilah, upon seeing that Quick Mike had a small penis, giggled. This giggle so enraged Quick Mike that he attacked and mutilated her. The phallocentricity of this universe is later reinforced through Little Bill's retelling of the duel between English Bob/Richard Harris and Corky Corcoran. Corky is described as having a large penis, and is said to have had sex with a woman whom English Bob desired. English Bob perceived this as an insult, and murdered Corky. Although the film suggests that there is a possibility of tenderness and affiliation in this universe, the film also clearly states that this possibility is usually negated by the tendency of its male characters toward masculine ego-assertion. At the film's conclusion, Little Bill's reign is destroyed — as are all of the positive male relationships that the film has presented us with.

“Christ, maybe he's tough, but he sure ain't no carpenter.”

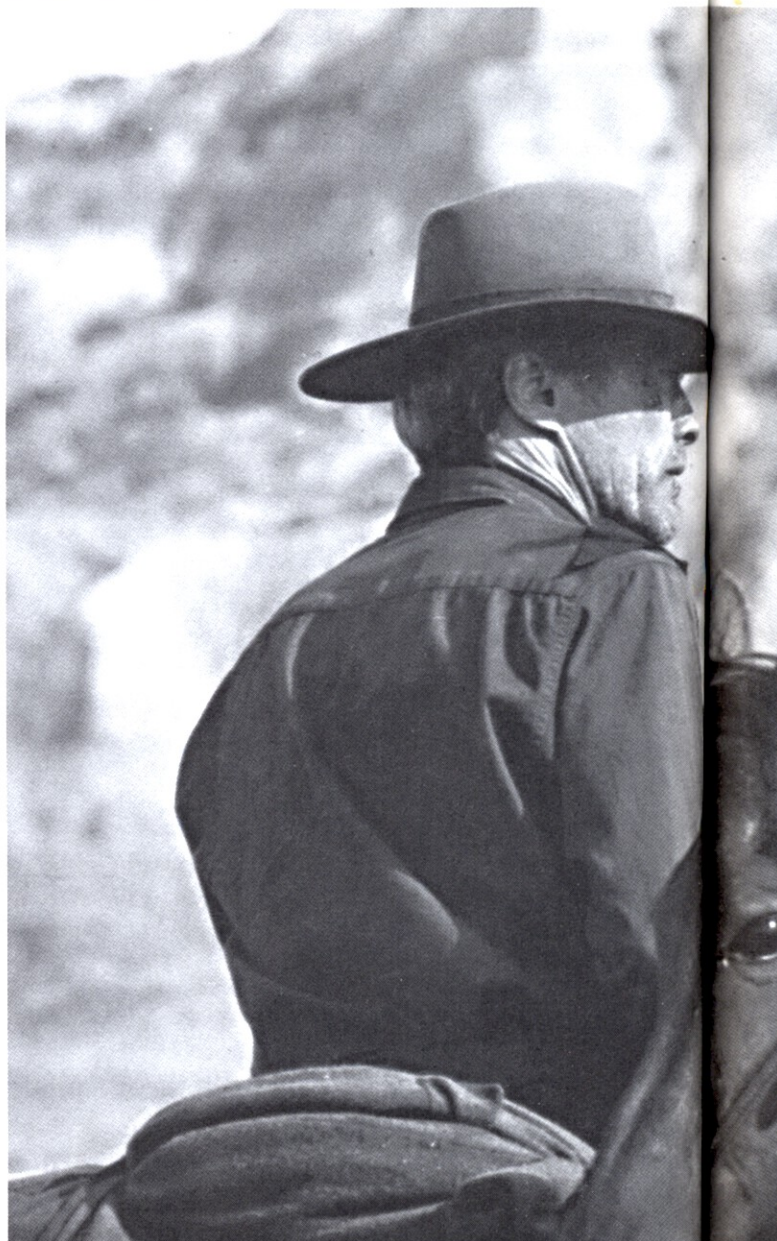
Unforgiven presents us with characters who undertake a series of actions in order to establish their masculine prowess. Apart from the mutilation of Delilah, we are also presented with English Bob's shooting of the pheasants, Little Bill's game of “chicken” with English Bob, and so on. It is Will's reputation for prowess in the area of killing people that initially brings the Schofield Kid to approach Will as a potential partner in the murders of Davey and Quick Mike. Will's credentials are enthusiastically related by the Schofield Kid at their first meeting — “Uncle Pete says you was the meanest god-damn son of a bitch alive, and if I ever wanted a partner for a killin', you was the worst one, meanin' the best, on account of you're as cold as the snow and you don't have no weak nerve nor fear”. Ned later confirms this assessment of Will's skills by remembering how Will had single-handedly killed three deputies in a shoot-out. Will here represents a classic example of the James Bond persona — he is the coolly efficient man of action who always defeats his opponent.

In North American culture, the James Bond persona exists at the extreme end of a continuum of masculinity, at the other end of which the incompetent man, or Jerry Lewis persona, is located. Our first image of Will is that of him falling face down into pig feces as he ineffectually tries to separate his hogs. His early target practice results in six clean misses in a row — only with a shot-gun does he manage to

knock a tin can off of a fence post. He is forced to endure a grotesque ballet with his horse every time he tries to mount it, and is frequently thrown from it. Similarly, Little Bill, whose reputation for violence equals that of Will, smashes his thumb with a hammer while constructing his roof — which is later found to be full of leaks. As with its refusal to provide us with the moral framework that the Classical and Revisionist western have prepared us for, the film also refuses to define its characters in terms of the usual scale of prowess/incompetence that concepts of masculinity in North American culture prepare us for.

“I'll see you in Hell, Will Munny”.

By pairing Will and Little Bill in terms of prowess and incompetence, *Unforgiven* challenges our traditional relationship to the film's protagonist and to the film's antagonist. Although the depiction of Will's love for his late wife and regret for his former actions persuade us to regard him sympathetically, whereas Little Bill is rendered unsympathetic through his tendency to gloat over and derive ego-satisfaction from sadism, the film refuses to clearly cast Will in the light of a Revisionist agent of justice — because Will and Little



Bill are highly similar to one another in most other respects. The dividing line between the behavior of the protagonist and the behavior of the antagonist becomes unclear here.

Little Bill, early in the film, is actually portrayed as having the capacity for the same horror of violence that Will displays. When Strawberry Alice/Frances Fisher demands that harsher punishment be meted out for Quick Mike's attack on Delilah, Little Bill seems almost sickened as he asks her "Ain't you seen enough blood for one night?" Conversely, the scene depicting Will's tenderness for Delilah is immediately (and, through the use of an abrupt cut, jarringly) followed by the scene depicting Will's murder of Davey — which is probably the most excruciating sequence in the film. The portrayal of Davey's fear and pain as he crawls toward safe cover, dragging his broken leg behind him, and the agony of Davey's death, make this scene almost unbearable to watch. Witnessing this, Will breaks down and promises the other cowboys that he won't shoot if they give Davey a drink of water. Ned is horrified by the incident, and leaves the troupe. Similarly, the Schofield Kid is later horrified by his murder of Quick Mike, and expresses remorse and regret. Will, however, is emotionally unaffected in the aftermath of Davey's murder, and con-

"We ain't bad men no more": Will (Clint Eastwood) and Ned (Morgan Freeman).



tinues to plan the murder of Quick Mike with an almost professional demeanor. *Unforgiven* asks us to consider what type of behavior may we consider the more dysfunctional — that of the man who gloats over his use of violence, or that of the man who is unaffected by his use of violence?

“That ain’t fair, Little Bill”

The depiction of violence in *Unforgiven* differs from both the Classical and the Revisionist traditions, in which violence is used for immoral purposes by the film’s antagonists, and for moral purposes by the film’s protagonists. (The chief difference between them is that the portrayal of violence in the Revisionist western tends to be far more graphic than it is in the Classical western, and the morality violence is committed in the name of is usually far more omnipotent and far less precisely defined in the Revisionist Western than it is in the Classical Western). In the world of *Unforgiven*, however, violence is a function of both ego-assertion and economics. The attack on Delilah certainly represents a violation of what normally would be considered her most basic human rights, yet Little Bill, as the film’s chief authority figure, constructs the attack as a matter of economics. Skinny/Anthony James tells him “I got a contract here that represents an investment of capital”, and Little Bill immediately replies, “Property”. Delilah is therefore further degraded than she has already been through Quick Mike’s attack, by Little Bill’s application of Big Whiskey’s socially sanctioned “justice” system to her mutilation.

The murders of Davey and Ned are also related to this equation of justice with socio-economic power. Davey and Ned are the only two male characters in the film who are unable to bring themselves to harm others (Davey, particularly, is the only male in the film who tries to prevent others from being harmed), yet they also suffer the two most horrifying deaths that we are shown in the film. The reason for Davey’s murder is blatantly economic — Will, Ned, and the Schofield Kid are doing it for the money. Ned’s death, as a result of Little Bill’s sadism, is not directly economically motivated — however, Ned is depicted as being tied and whipped by Little Bill in a manner which obviously draws a comparison between this treatment of Ned and the treatment of slaves by plantation owners. Ned’s death, therefore, is also linked to the tendency to view human beings as economic commodities that Little Bill evokes at the beginning of the film.

“I ain’t like that no more”.

Whereas masculine ego-assertion manifests itself as the predominant psychological motivation of the film’s main characters, denial seems to be their predominant psychological process. The dysfunctionality of behavior is constantly denied throughout this film both at the social and at the personal level. Little Bill reacts to Strawberry Alice’s insistence that he is being too lenient with Quick Mike with the comment “It ain’t like they was given to wickedness in a regular way”. Similar to this assertion is Will’s continued insistence, “I ain’t like that no more”. Will first makes this declaration when he



is initially approached by the Schofield Kid as a prospective partner. Will decides to join the Schofield Kid, however, and is greeted by Ned with Ned’s declaration that “We ain’t bad men no more”. Will and Ned’s first camp-fire together is punctuated with at least four similar declarations by Will. The fact of the matter remains, however, that the conclusion of the film will show Will to emerge as the film’s most ruthlessly efficient killer.

Denial is manifested on a social level in the reaction of the deputies and the townspeople to Little Bill’s beatings of English Bob, Will, and Ned. Far from being laudatory and enthusiastic in their reactions, the deputies and townspeople are sickened by Little Bill’s cruelty. Despite the fact that they are all horrified by Little Bill’s behavior, not one of them is willing publicly to acknowledge the obvious fact that Little Bill is a dangerous psychopath.

Ironically, it is Will’s final acceptance of his identity as a killer that leads to the shoot-out at the film’s climax. Will’s achievement of self-knowledge, however, occurs simultaneously with the Schofield Kid’s first act of denial. The Schofield Kid says, “I ain’t like you, Will”, despite the fact that he has just murdered Quick Mike. Although Will has



finally gained self-knowledge, the film implies that the legacy of denial will continue.

"First you got to cock it".

Unforgiven also thematically positions itself against Classical and Revisionist Western mythology in its treatment of the relationship of Will and Little Bill to their acolytes. The relationship of Will to the Schofield Kid is similar to that of Ethan to Martin in John Ford's *The Searchers*, in which Ethan tutors and eventually accepts Martin as a member of his family. Martin, however, realizes Ethan's intentions towards Debbie, and rejects Ethan. Similarly, under Will's guidance, the Schofield Kid murders Quick Mike, and is acknowledged by Will as a friend. The Schofield Kid, however, is horrified by what he has done, and rejects Will. Yet, the Schofield Kid's reformation is declared with the comment "I ain't like you, Will", just as Will's earlier supposed reformation was repeatedly declared with the comment "I ain't like that no more". This indicates that both supposed reformations are founded in denial, and that the cycle of violence will continue.

The relationship of Little Bill to Beauchamp/Saul Rubinek parallels the relationship of Tom Donovan to Ranse

'The dividing line... becomes unclear...': Little Bill (Gene Hackman) and Will in confrontation.

Stoddard in Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Little Bill's instruction to Beauchamp, "First you got to cock it", is a direct allusion to the earlier film. Both films are concerned with the relationship of myth to reality. In Ford's film, Donovan and Stoddard collude to perpetuate the myth that Stoddard shot Liberty Valance, whereas in Eastwood's film Little Bill and Beauchamp collude to demolish the myth surrounding English Bob's murder of Corky Corcoran. Like the Schofield Kid, Will, and Little Bill, Beauchamp is also portrayed as an incompetent character — his inability to remain cool under pressure when he first encounters Little Bill causes him to urinate in his pants, a fact highlighted by Little Bill's sardonic instruction of "Don't get wet" to his deputy. Later, however, as Beauchamp and Little Bill get drenched in Little Bill's house because of Little Bill's incompetence as a carpenter, Beauchamp highlights Little Bill's incompetence with the comment "You should hang the carpenter".

"When confronted by superior numbers..."

A great deal of *Unforgiven*'s success in the "politically correct" early nineties lies in the film's consistent depiction of violence as deglamorized. Unlike popular action films, the film gives us no standard "fight scene". Instead, we are presented with Little Bill's beatings of English Bob and Will, and of his torture and murder of Ned. These scenes do not highlight masculine prowess or skills at fisticuffs; rather, the emphasis is on the physical suffering that English Bob, Will, and Ned experience at the hands of Little Bill, and on Little Bill's emerging psychosis as he brutalizes them. The murder of Davey, as mentioned before, is horrifying, whereas the murder of Quick Mike is absurd — he is shot to death in the outhouse by the Schofield Kid while he defecates. As the Schofield Kid and Will escape, the Schofield Kid is unable to fire at his pursuers because, owing to poor vision (incompetence), he can't see them, whereas Will is almost unable to mount his cantankerous horse.

The film further deflates Western mythology in its depiction of the relationship of Little Bill to Beauchamp, and in its depiction of the later relationship of Beauchamp to Will. The version of the duel between English Bob and Corky Corcoran that Beauchamp expounds, in which English Bob is portrayed as defending the honor of a woman besieged by several attackers, is usurped by Little Bill's recounting of the actual occurrence, in which English Bob is revealed to be cowardly (he is firing on an unprepared opponent), incompetent (he misses Corky twice because he is too drunk to shoot straight) and far more concerned with masculine ego-assertion than he is with chivalry (it is stressed that English Bob murdered Corky for having sex with a woman he desired, and further stressed that Corky had an extremely large penis). After the climactic shoot-out, Beauchamp attempts to mythologize Will's murder of Little Bill, Slim, and the deputies in terms of Will's superior skill (prowess) as a gunfighter. Will deflates this attempt at mythologization with the comment "I was lucky in the order, but I've always been lucky when it comes to killin' folks".

"Deserve's got nothin' to do with it".

The film contrasts a belief in a moral universe with a reality of an amoral universe in which any notion of an objective standard of morality is utterly negated. At the beginning of the film, Will silently communes with his late wife by her graveside. Leaving his children, he exhorts them to "Remember how the spirit of your dear departed Ma watches over us". The beginning of Will's descent to his former self is signaled to us by his reversion to his former habit of cussing his horse. Shortly after this he catches a fever, is beaten by Little Bill, and lies delirious for several days. In his delirium he sees the image of the angel of death coupled with the image of his dead wife — her face now covered with worms. When he awakes, he believes Delilah to be an angel. However, he also now believes himself to be spiritually distant from his dead wife. Where he had previously told his children that her spirit "watches over us", he now tells Delilah that his wife watches over his children back in Kansas.

Will's relationship to his dead wife is the only source of morality and tenderness that the film presents us with. It is this relationship that had previously reformed him, and that allows him in the film's present to bond with Delilah. As Will's physical proximity to Big Whiskey (a place where he intends to commit a murder for money) increases, and his physical proximity to his wife's grave decreases, Will's character becomes as devoid of any aspect of spirituality as any of the other male characters in the film. Any connection that Will had managed to maintain to his previous reformation is severed when he learns that Ned has been murdered in reprisal for the murder that Will and the Schofield Kid had committed. Will now assumes the identity of the angel of death that he had earlier seen coupled with his wife in his delirium, rides into Big Whiskey, enters the saloon, and displays a supernatural degree of prowess in annihilating Little Bill and his deputies. Although Will would seem to be a Revisionist agent of justice here, this notion is quickly deflated by the absurdity of the threats that Will shouts to the town as he leaves the saloon — for he uses the language of a five-year-old bully in a public school playground.

Unforgiven certainly ranks as one of Eastwood's finest directorial achievements, and has been compared to his earlier Revisionist Western, *High Plains Drifter*. A comparison of these two films will inevitably show the degree to which Eastwood developed both as a director and as a thinker between the making of these two films. *High Plains Drifter* is based very firmly in the Revisionist tradition. Sex is depicted solely as rape, the town fathers are invariably corrupt, and it is implied that Eastwood's character in this film is a supernatural figure who comes to impose some form of universal justice on the town. Imagery in *High Plains Drifter* is often used very blatantly — the town is painted red and renamed "Hell", for example. *Unforgiven* strikes me not only as far more complex than *High Plains Drifter*, I also find it to be far less nihilistic than the earlier film. Although sex is consistently displayed as a commercial transaction in *Unforgiven*, the film also admits the possibility of love. Although the townspeople clearly do not oppose Little Bill's brand of jus-



The climactic shootout.

tice, they are presented as overtly appalled at his sadism. Imagery is also better incorporated into the structure of *Unforgiven* than it is in *High Plains Drifter* — the image of Will aside a pale horse as he enters Big Whiskey is presented in a straight-on long shot, leaving it to the viewer to make the appropriate connections.

It has also been suggested that both films depict their worlds as purged of corruption by the end credits. In *High Plains Drifter* this purging assumes biblical proportions — the town is burnt to the ground (simultaneously annihilated and baptized by fire). At the conclusion of *Unforgiven* the town still stands — but it has been purged of its most violent characters by sheer attrition. It has also been suggested that Will's implied later success in dry goods represents that he has been purged on a personal level. Will's final instruction to the town, that no more prostitutes be mutilated and that Ned should be buried properly, really mandates that people in Big Whiskey should treat each other with a basic degree of respect for one another. This, coupled with the removal of Little Bill and his brand of justice, establishes the potential for a new life in the town at the film's conclusion. Despite the

fact that *Unforgiven* abandons the clearly defined attitudes toward morality that are represented in the Classical Hollywood and the Revisionist Western, *Unforgiven*, in the final analysis, ultimately stands as a far more humane film than Eastwood's earlier Revisionist standard.

Peter E.S. Babiak wonders how Robin Wood could possibly have known that Hamlet's sixth soliloquy was Peter's favourite of the lot.

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by Robert K. Lightning

“WE HAVE SECRETS”

Borzage, romance and the bourgeois state



The Mortal Storm: the anti-fascist lovers
(James Stewart and Margaret Sullivan)
Note: no stills are available from *Secrets*

An examination of *Secrets* (1933) provides an opportunity for a political interpretation (both preliminary and rudimentary in nature) of the films of Frank Borzage, "the cinema's Great Romantic," a description both partially accurate (references to the transformative power of romantic love run throughout his work) and severely limiting to revaluation efforts. Its continued potency is evidenced by this evaluation of the director from Kent Jones' recent article (*Film Comment*, Sept.-Oct. 1997, p.33): "He was a Hollywood melodramatist with absolutely no interest in the workings of everyday life..." It is my hope to demonstrate that it is precisely Borzage's keen awareness of these "workings" as the everyday embodiment of powerful socio-political forces that dictate his emotional and dramatic investment in romance. (Although I find much with which to argue in the Jones piece, I leave it to the reader to compare interpretations, although I think a recourse to the actual films provides sufficient refutation).

Secrets' episodic structure provides an additional opportunity to examine the possible uses of genre theory for interpretations of classical Hollywood. As Robin Wood has noted:

"One of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete. An ideological approach might suggest why they can't be, however hard they may appear to try: at best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions."

Hitchcock's Films Revisited, Columbia University Press, 1989, p.292

Wood notes further (as evidence of genre's fluidness) that motifs commonly cross from genre to genre. These instances of generic hybrids are of particular value for their foregrounding of ideology. Hitchcock's *The Birds* provides an excellent example, specifically of the infusion of the horror film by the motifs of the Western. Melanie Daniels has in fact usurped the role of the Western hero who roams the plains, the questing Man of the West. This is implicit in her description of Rome ("It was very easy to get lost there...I thought it was time I began...finding something again"). Her quest leads her to an archetypal Western setting, the organic western community (Bodega Bay, California) still closely allied to agrarianism. Hitchcock's references to the Western are partially ironic: whereas the Western adventurer only touches the domestic sphere tangentially, Melanie's quest leads to an *exploration* of heterosexual domesticity. The ironic deployment of the Western underlines the cultural conscription of women to roles that have not significantly altered since the settling of the West, a point underlined by the two female archetypes from the Western that Melanie encounters in Bodega Bay: the farm wife (Mrs. Brenner) and a character who combines the school marm and the Whore with-the-

heart-of-gold (Annie Hayworth who, following tradition, dies proving her love for the hero).

Secrets is less a hybrid of generic motifs than three dramatically discrete acts or movements (complete with epilogue/coda) each characterised predominantly by the motifs of a specific genre (the Borzage romance, the Western, the domestic melodrama). The three movements are joined by the overall structure of the Thru-the-years narrative, a term I apply to those epic dramas — *Cimarron* (1931) and *Cavalcade* (1933) are obvious examples — centered on the events of a marriage. The crucial equating of the family with the progress of the nation and the foregrounding of the connection made possible by the focus upon a marriage differentiates these films from those epic narratives where the connection may be more covert owing to more diversified narrative interest (e.g. *The Birth of a Nation*) or narrative privileging of one exceptional person (e.g. *Gone with the Wind*).

Regarding genre theory, *Secrets* presents the historic expansion of bourgeois power throughout the U.S. in *stages*, the motifs of a specific genre predominant at each stage. This in turn allows for a comparative analysis of patriarchal capitalist ideology as it expresses itself in the norms of courtship and marriage (the romance), in relation to the land, community and the state (the Western), and as it is perpetuated in the social form of the family (the domestic melodrama).

Secrets' contemporaries, *Cimarron* and *Cavalcade*, are essentially conservative ventures, the latter being particularly jingoistic in its fervor, the former making at least superficial nods to liberalism. Both end with the couple reaffirming their original commitment to the marriage (and, implicitly, their past efforts on behalf of the nation) this despite (in *Cavalcade*) an ever changing world (which now includes liberated women, homosexuals and jazz) viewed as chaotic or (in *Cimarron*) the long separation of wife and husband due to the latter's commitment to the ethos of the white male adventurer. *Secrets* alone allows for a subversive reading (significantly the couple at the end are *escaping* from the civilization they helped to forge) made possible by Borzage's inflection of the materials of the Western and domestic melodrama but also an inversion of the motifs of the Borzage romance.

THE BORZAGE ROMANCE

The Borzage romance is not a genre, of course, (despite my apparently indiscriminate categorising) but in one crucial way it is similar to one. The classical Hollywood genre is characterised by a repetitive and conventional exposition and resolution of ideological issues. At its simplest it induces a sense of familiarity in the audience and is ideologically reaffirming. Genre is (in Andrew Britton's description) "film's commodity form". It is in fact the audience's expectation of the familiar (again induced by repeat-



ed exposure) that makes genre ideal for radical inflection and auteurist critical practice (at its most basic and unrefined) has taught the viewer to discern the individual artist's imprint upon the generic materials.

But it is demonstrably true that an individual's imprint may be sufficiently pronounced, obsessive or pre-occupied that it becomes its own commodity form, setting up similar audience expectations, even the expectation of surprise. The vague description "Hitchcock thriller" (it has been applied with equal lack of discrimination to Hitchcock's work in the espionage drama, the modern horror film and the melodrama) may be essentially worthless in terms of critical analysis, but in terms of audience expectations it has some value regarding recurring thematic concerns, stylistic "touches", tone, as well as genres deployed: it is *because* their materials have proven ideal for the exposition of the director's concerns that Hitchcock has returned to the espionage drama, etc. rather than the musical or the screwball comedy (although he has worked in both genres).

Borzage's *oeuvre* also can be discussed in terms of a repeated recourse to a specific genre (romantic drama) as well as a pronounced and discernible political and stylistic inflection of that genre. Hitchcock makes an interesting figure for comparison and contrast. The recurring interest in the heterosexual couple is an obvious link between the two but from opposite political poles: Hitchcock's interest is characterized by a ruthless investigation of the terms and resulting tensions of male dominated heterosexual relations; Borzage is notable for his absolute belief in the union of man and woman as the ultimate source of human fulfillment.

Certain motifs recur incessantly (provoking the description Borzagean) in the Borzage romance: the impoverished couple; the sacred space that provides them sanctuary; the subverting of the laws of both the church and state in the lovers' union (Borzage's lovers often do not marry); an emphasis on the ennobling effects (primarily for women) of self-sacrifice, forbearance, faith, etc.; an emphasis upon loss of faith and solipsism (particularly that

of men) as impediments to romantic love and, thus, human fulfillment. These are the components of the Borzage romance at its most fully developed and rarefied as exemplified in *Seventh Heaven*, *Street Angel*, *Liliom*, and (judging from all reports) *Man's Castle*.

Borzage, however, worked in a wider range of genres than Hitchcock (literally from musicals to *films noirs*), their materials necessarily limiting the full exposition of the director's concerns. Borzage's commitment to the transcendent heterosexual romance is so complete that the motifs of the Borzage romance continue to operate (separately or in tandem) even outside of his work in romantic drama per se. These instances of self-referencing allow the viewer to compare and contrast the immediate deployment of Borzagean elements with those works where his romantic ethos is allowed fuller development. Thus in *The Mortal Storm* the union of the lovers (as is usual in Borzage) operates outside of church and state law: following a peasant tradition the couple drink from the traditional wedding cup, the ritual overseen by the hero's mother. The Borzagean motif as deployed here also coincides with the generic concerns of the anti-Nazi film: the need to accommodate tradition to the urgency of the current political crisis (the ritual that is usually an adjunct to a wedding here *replaces* the wedding, the mother, in essence, conducting the ceremony); the desire to honor the mother (for whom the ritual is performed) whom the couple, pursued by Nazis, may never see again; the dissolution of yet another family (compare as premonitory the professor's birthday near the opening) as a result of the fascist regime. But we should also be aware of how the union is *un-Borzagean*: although it is clear that Martin (in a familiar display of James Stewart romanticism) loves Freya (Margaret Sullavan), it is equally clear that she has not fallen in love in the familiar (cultural or Borzagean) sense, that her commitment is political in nature as the lovers are two of the few remaining persons who have adopted an explicitly anti-Nazi stance.

Other examples can be cited. The wedding in *Three Comrades* is again subversive in a mildly Borzagean sense (the playing of the wedding march is distorted when the gramophone recording slows down, the couple kiss *before*



Above and opposite: Mary Pickford



Seventh Heaven: the sanctum sanctorum (Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell).

they are pronounced husband and wife) but it is also un-Borzagean: contrary to the exclusiveness or the Borzagean union which "shut[s]...happiness in" (as Angela puts it in *Street Angel*) the bride here essentially marries all three of the comrades. In *I've Always Loved You*, an exemplary melodrama (it shares with both *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and Rapper's *Deception* the use of the concert stage as a metaphor for the world of patriarchal privilege, a world to which Woman's access is impeded) the lovers' sacred space becomes an exclusively *female* space (the "wishing room") invaded by the male during the woman's absence in the name of romantic love. The opening movement of *Secrets* can also be read in these terms, as a dialectic between the Borzagean and the un-Borzagean. The narrative (which begins in mid-19th century New England) again involves lovers united within social oppression: he, economically, as a clerk in her father's shipping firm; she, as the daughter of wealth, by her obligations to the bourgeoisie (against which she rebels) and its customs (a prestigious marriage has been arranged for her). The viewer should be immediately alerted to the possibilities of alternative thematic and political developments by the un-Borzagean elements: the historical American setting (as opposed to a European working-class neighborhood or a contemporary American slum); the differing class affiliations of the couple (as opposed to the Borzagean couple united by mutual working-class affiliation or by economic oppression so complete that class affiliation is not an issue); the oppressive world of upper-class privilege that Borzage renders both directly (the constant parental reprimands of the daughter for her lack of propriety) and symbolically (the layers of the hoop skirt that subjugate the daughter in a boudoir scene).

A creative element linking Hitchcock and Borzage is a mutual fascination with the range of creative possibilities inherent in the apparatus of cinematic artifice (back projection, miniatures, matting, etc.) from their anti-Realist deployment (German expressionism seems to have been an important influence on both) to that supporting Realist principles. However, if we invoke, for instance, the use of miniatures in their respective *oeuvres*, ambiguities arise (ambiguities which are at the heart of Realism debates). Is the use of a miniature for, say, the Blackwell mansion (where the lovers tryst) in *Moonrise* or for Manderley in *Rebecca* meant to deceive the viewer or is it meant for the audience to register (on whatever level of consciousness) as symbolic (expressive of fragility, artificiality, etc.)? If I side with the latter interpretation the reader will understand why I regard the use of back projection in the opening scene of *Secrets*, where clerk John Carlton (Leslie Howard), on bicycle, overtakes the carriage of wealthy Mary Marlowe (Mary Pickford) to flirt with her, as indicative of the relationship's comparative superficiality, compared that is with the profound emotional need that unites a sewer worker and a physically and emotionally abused waif in *Seventh Heaven*. Further evidence is the use of a miniature for the Marlowe mansion as well as studio-

built exteriors and interiors, as well as for the home the couple create on the western frontier (having eloped) in contrast to actual *location footage* for their trek west. Borzage here introduces a dialectical relationship between artifice and the signifiers of "reality" which will be taken up later.

THE WESTERN

The Westerns that followed World War II are distinguished by a distintegrating confidence in at least two ideological concerns: the ethos of masculinity embodied in the Western's male adventurer and the validity (ethical, cultural) of U.S. expansion into the West. The two issues, of course, are interrelated: the popular notion of U.S. expansionism as a civilizing force finds its concrete realization in white settlement and domestication of the land; the values of settlement are at odds with the mythology of the white male adventurer. A diminishing faith can already be felt before the war. *Stagecoach* famously introduces the modern era of the Western by having its central couple "saved" from civilization, settling outside of the U.S. 1939 also introduces (in *Destry Rides Again*) one of the progenitors of the modern Western — James Stewart — as a Western hero who (anticipating his later work for Mann and Ford) is significant for his difference from the Western's man of action (he doesn't wear a gun). Destry, like the Stewart/Mann protagonist, represses the ideological tension between wandering/action and settlement, which then erupts in hysteria and violence. As the Western male ethos *was* fully embodied by the hero's own father, the implication of Oedipal rivalry in *Destry* additionally anticipates the appellation "psychological" that has been applied to the post-war Western.

I would place *Secrets* in that handful of films that anticipate trends that fully develop after the war. It in fact bears a startling resemblance to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (although as its narrative also recalls *Cimarron* the resemblance is partly generic). Both follow the course of a man from the East who (following Horace Greeley's advice, a point made explicit in *Liberty Valance*) ventures west in pursuit of personal fulfillment. There he encounters a vicious outlaw whom he must overcome by codes of masculine behavior completely foreign to him. He eventually parlays his subsequent fame as a civilizing force in the West into a prestigious career in politics. A critical attitude toward the man is common to the Borzage and the Ford (though not to *Cimarron*), the latter being also an elegy for the Man of the West. In both films the exploitation of his fame (in the pursuit of political power) by the man who has usurped the role of the man of action renders him pompous and solipsistic, chiefly evidenced by his indifference to the woman who has long supported his efforts.

A critique of American expansionism is common to both, although in the Borzage how much credit is to be given to the director and how much to screenwriter Frances Marion is difficult to assess (the two had worked together on several occasions including the original 1924

Secrets). Marion had already turned a critical eye upon an early American community in *The Scarlet Letter* and the frontier community in *The Wind*, both directed by Sjöström and starring Lillian Gish. (In terms of intertextual references the scenes in *Secrets* depicting the isolated wife and baby under threat and the mother's discovery of the dead child recall respectively *The Wind* and Griffith's *Way Down East* and, as with Gish, are clearly meant to provide dramatic opportunities for the star, here Mary Pickford). Ambivalence toward American culture runs throughout Borzage's work without Marion, as is suggested by the recurring recourse to European settings. Their work together provides a consistent critique of that mythologised space and heir to the American agrarian dream, the American small town, focussing particularly on certain archetypal figures. In *Lazybones* (1925) the focus is on that familiar figure of criticism in small town narratives, the repressive and social climbing petit bourgeois matron, who here drives one daughter to madness and early death and another to loneliness and isolation, a surprising incursion of the melodrama into what is chiefly a social comedy. In *Backpay* (1922) and *I've Always Loved You* (1946, not scripted by Marion) the heroine's ardent and benignly romantic lover (a farmer in the latter) becomes castrating and oppressive after marriage. In the earlier film this takes the form of the dead husband's nighttime reappearances as a moralizing and judgemental ghost, a disturbing incursion of the horror film into the melodrama.

The importance of the scenes depicting the frontier family under siege and its aftermath can be derived from Engels' formula for the consolidation of the state in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884):

"...it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it is cleft into irreconcilable antagonism...But it is in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in sterile struggle a power seemingly standing above society became necessary for the purpose of moderating the conflict...arisen out of society, but placing itself above it..."

The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker, W.W. Norton and Co., Inc. 1978, p.752.

As these developments are "arisen out of society" the state is further "...as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class which through the medium of the state also becomes the politically dominant class" (p.753).

The formula holds for any number of Westerns, including *Cimarron* and *Liberty Valance*. In *Secrets* it is expressive of the consolidation of bourgeois power within the state: in terms of narrative developments the immediate effect of John Carlton's involvement in the subduing of the outlaw Jake Houser and his subsequent fame is great wealth and growing political power (he is running for governor). The

war between cattle rustler Houser (who also threatens Mary while John is away) and the Carltons is, if not a matter of differing economic categories, then of essentially differing class norms. The Carltons have instituted bourgeois norms on the prairie: the gender division of labor (Mary keeps house, John raises cattle); the establishment of class strata (they have a faithful, all-purpose servant who, although he risks his life equally, does not share in the Carltons' subsequent wealth or power); the private ownership of property. We can, in fact, trace a direct line of normative bourgeois modes from England to the New World (the Marlowes of New England had eagerly sought to marry their daughter to an English lord) to the frontier to Washington D.C., where the Carltons eventually become significant players. The link for the expansion of bourgeois power is the historic movement of powerless people who are, although disenfranchised, deeply inculcated by the norms of the oppressors they ostensibly escape.

The Housers on the other hand are a classic villainous all-male group, Woman as civilizing agent absent. But as in later Westerns (eg. *My Darling Clementine*) they trouble not by their difference from but their similarity to the protagonists. We might propose then that the capitalist principle of private property makes logical property's acquisition by subversive means and thus makes possible the Housers (a point implied in Jake's comment on the cattle, "They was yours Missus...they're mine now"). The Housers are also a family, a point underscored when Jake seeks revenge for his brother's death (hung by the Carlton posse) as John sought revenge for the threat to Mary in his absence.

It is in fact Mary's participation in the proceedings that is most significant, for it is she who encourages John to "take the law into your own hands" when she discovers that he, having encountered the rustlers with the stolen cattle, had done nothing (he was outnumbered). To his proposal that they do nothing and return East, she responds "You'd let a man like Jake Houser drive you out of the country". Later during the siege (the indirect result of her prodding) she participates fully in defence of the home. The film's condemnation of the Carltons' joint actions is implied in its use of their baby who 1) becomes ill (of unexplained origin) while John and the posse pursue the Housers and 2) dies during the siege.

The establishment of power both within the home (the further cementing of John's role as dominant patriarchal male) and within the state, as well as the attainment of bourgeois wealth (symbolised by the Carlton mansion of the next movement which like the earlier Marlowe mansion and the frontier home is constructed in the studio), is not only linked to bloodshed and death (the killing of the Housers, the symbolic death of the child) but the wife's involvement. The theme of the "bloody bourgeoisie" runs throughout the American cinema, transcending genre. From *Cape Fear* (Thompson, 1962) to *Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972) to *Face/Off* (Woo, 1997) the common theme — the willingness of the bourgeois family to sub-

vert its own norms and institutions when its interests are threatened or (in the Craven) in bloody revenge for crimes perpetrated against it — finds a common narrative feature: the (re)union of the family members in the bloodletting. In *Cape Fear* the wife goes from incredulosity (“I can’t believe we’re standing here talking about killing a man”) to giving the OK to eliminate the threatening lower-class villain (she in fact describes the family as “pioneer stock”). However incoherently (the difficulty of proposing a Marxist critique of the bourgeoisie in 90s America is fully borne out by the film), *Face/Off* makes clear that tensions within the nuclear family are essentially resolved when mother and daughter unite with father to eliminate his villainous double.

The critique of the “bloody bourgeoisie” is continuous with that of western masculinity. As in *Liberty Valance* there is an explicit textual reference (Ransom Stoddard’s query of Valance “What kind of man are you?”) to the issue of masculinity: the Western segment begins with a quotation from the song *Lavender Cowboy* (“...only a lavender cowboy...the hairs on his chest numbered two...”). *Secrets* combines two of Ford’s representative males (Tom/John Wayne and Ransom/James Stewart) into John Carlton, who is transformed from the domesticated male into the Man of Action. If both films indict the pompous politician that the domesticated male eventually becomes both also indict his complement. In the Ford this takes the form of a complex *doppelgänger* relationship between Tom and Liberty (made explicit by Ransom’s comment “You’re saying just what Liberty Valance said”). As John Carlton embodies both forms of manhood, the film presents a joint critique. Crucially, although viciously threatened by the Housers in John’s absence, mother and child remain physically unharmed. Thus Carlton’s posse essentially hangs Davey Houser for crimes against *property rights*. In *Secrets* the critique of western action and bourgeois domesticity cannot be separated. There thus can be no equivalent to Ford’s elegiac tone.

THE DOMESTIC MELODRAMA

The Borzage romance relates to a cycle of American films that reflects a preoccupation in capitalist societies: How to reconcile the proletariat to the norms of the bourgeois nuclear family when the economic and social conditions of alienated labor are inimical to success? The proletarian or big city romance (it inevitably develops in the industrialized city) includes such films as *The Crowd*, *Lonesome*, and *The Marrying Kind*. The cycle regularly emphasizes both uniquely urban pleasures (the inevitable trip to Coney Island) as well as uniquely urban catastrophes (e.g. the subway crowd that separates the lovers in *The Clock*). It is to the cycle’s credit that it often refuses a happy resolution, providing at best a promise of future fulfillment (eg. the promise of future employment at the conclusion of *From This Day Forward*).

Borzage’s economically strapped couples are distinguished by their spirituality and an examination of

Borzage’s subversiveness can fruitfully begin here. The Victorian home was also distinguished by its spiritual aspect, as a space, like the church, beyond the enveloping realm of capitalist production. As Eli Zaretsky notes (in *Capitalism, The Family and Personal Life*) “As in the Middle Ages, so now with the bourgeoisie, the domain of the spirit had once again separated off from the realm of production”. However, a familiar subtext in capitalist culture — from the Bible to the myth of King Midas to Freud’s middle-class patients — is that the values of material acquisition run counter to emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Thus the popular notion of the middle-class home as *sanctum sanctorum* also serves to mitigate the contradictory objective evidence of the home’s material comforts by conflating materialism with spirituality. The point is made emphatically in *Cavalcade* when at the conclusion the upper-class couple (married during Victoria’s reign) bravely face the future, a brightly lit cross beaming above.

Borzage appropriates the spiritual component of the Victorian home and applies it to his impoverished lovers, but in ways (unlike the proletarian romance) that are non-normative. The incompatibility of the Material and the Spiritual seems a basic element in Borzage’s personal philosophy: It dictates the dramatic necessity that his lovers be of absolutely abject economic status or be returned to this state (eg. Spencer Tracy’s businessman in *Mannequin*). Thus, in *Seventh Heaven*, heavenly benediction (in the form of a ray of light) is bestowed upon the reunited lower-class lovers at the conclusion.

Borzage’s philosophy derives its political viability from the fact that it extends to all the institutionalized forms of bourgeois power. Thus, in *Seventh Heaven*, that sanctifying light also bypasses the representatives of organized religion (the priest), the nuclear family (a neighbor and his wife), and the state (Col. Brissac), all gathered to dissuade the heroine from her vigil. Borzage’s distrust of organized religion is exemplary of his antipathy to bourgeois institutions, as it dictates the familiar recourse to the romantic union that flaunts state and church law (e.g. Chico’s plea directly to God — “Please make this a true marriage” — in *Seventh Heaven*).

The Carltons of the third movement contradict all the terms necessary for Borzage’s emotional/political investment: married in the traditional sense, wealthy (Mary is dressed throughout in an expensive ball gown, bedecked in jewels), and on the verge of wielding tremendous state power, unlike Borzage’s impoverished lovers who experience institutionalized power as oppressive (the constant intrusion of police in *Seventh Heaven*, *Street Angel* and *Liliom*). They are also a nuclear family. As is suggested by the nearly total absence of children in Borzage this is a social form which he regards with the greatest antipathy. When children do appear, the melodrama asserts itself within the text, both thematically and idiomatically. In *I’ve Always Loved You* (in a masterful deployment of cinematic language) Borzage fades out from the heroine embracing her soon-to-be-husband to the husband embracing their

young daughter some years later, their barely concealed incestuous bond excluding the mother, while thunder booms outside the home. As this implies, Borzage's critique of bourgeois norms logically extends to the perpetuation of its gender norms as enacted by the Oedipus. John Carlton's philandering (a family secret that is also the subject of outside gossip) provides the Oedipal son (William) with the opportunity to make a rival bid for the mother ("Why you're the ...the most beautiful woman in the whole world"), to assert authority over his younger siblings as well as a castrating moral authority toward the transgressive father (compare the sons of Stevenson's *Back Street* and Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow*). His assertion of masculine authority additionally restricts Mary's own agency in settling her own domestic affairs. The critique of the Oedipus' perpetuation of gender/social norms is summed up in the epilogue/coda when the now elderly John comments to Mary of their adult children, "Madam, your parents once frightened me, but your children terrify me".

It is a symptom of Borzage's artistic responsiveness and flexibility (revealing a sensitivity beyond that of the studio hack) that several of his films (*Three Comrades*, *Mannequin*, *The Shining Hour*, *I've Always Loved You*) lend themselves readily to pro-feminist interpretation. But for an artist primarily concerned with romance the problem arises as to how to resign the heroine (particularly an active and resourceful one) to the Borzage romance. The recurring solution is to find a complementary masculine *lack* to allow for Woman's strength. For Borzage then the greatest impediment to romance/fulfillment is not female autonomy but masculine self-sufficiency and solipsism. It is thus a common feature in Borzage that the male lover be brought low.

The complementary qualities assigned to Woman to counterbalance masculine solipsism are faith, forbearance and self-sacrifice. But as with everything in Borzage, a move up the socio-economic ladder invalidates their ennobling aspect. Two uses of Margaret Sullavan as long-suffering wives in melodramas make the point. As the tubercular wife of an impoverished mechanic in *Three Comrades*, Sullavan's sacrifice, although not without its ambiguities (is it to prevent further economic burden upon the "comrades" or to forestall further dwindling under the burden of her heterosexual commitment, her first attack occurring significantly on her honeymoon?) is finally ennobling, her death accompanied by the strains of the Liebestod. In *The Shining Hour* however, as the wife of a wealthy gentleman farmer, her attempt at self-immolation (the conditions of the bourgeois home having driven another woman to set it afire), to free her husband for another, is seen as monstrous, the final image of Sullavan completely swathed in bandages seemingly a reference to Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*.

Mary's silent forbearance in the face of John's multiple affairs must be seen in similar terms. Not the least telling factor against her is that, having compelled John to adopt the ethos of the Western's male adventurer, she now reaps

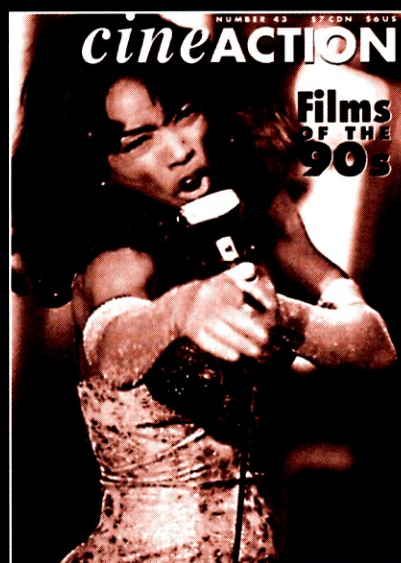
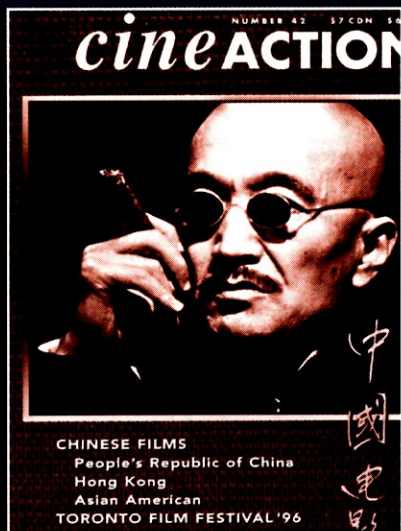
the dubious reward (John having adapted the adventurer's ethos to the domestic sphere) of her husband becoming a *sexual* wanderer. Also Mary suffers in the material comfort of the upper-class home, unlike, for instance, Angela suffering in prison in *Street Angel*. Finally, whereas the Borzage heroine is rewarded typically for her sacrifice by her lover's emotional and spiritual regeneration, Mary is rewarded with the solidification of bourgeois power, the film making it quite clear that it is her forbearance in the wake of the resulting public scandal that wins John the governorship.

Borzage's simultaneous investment in the couple and condemnation of the nuclear family recalls Leo McCarey (*Make Way for Tomorrow*, *Good Sam*, *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys*) and thus the resemblance of the final segment of *Secrets* to *Make Way* is perhaps not surprising. Of course in Borzage, the critique of male-dominated sexual relations never develops as far as in *The Awful Truth*, and a critique of romantic love (*Love Affair*, *An Affair to Remember*) is almost nonexistent. In both films the now elderly couple escape from their obligations to the nuclear family (temporarily in McCarey), oppressively represented by their now adult children (who now take revenge on their parents for their former impotence within the nuclear structure). McCarey convincingly conveys Lucy and Barc's mutual affection in loving detail as they return to the sites of their early love, recapturing what was theirs before they became the nuclear family (for which McCarey indicts them as fully as he does their children). At best we can credit Borzage with earnestness in his investment in the couple and their reaffirmed commitment but he cannot render it: the couple are on their way back to California as the film ends. Again economics plays its part. King Lear (to whom McCarey seems to be referring at the beginning of *Make Way*) divvies up a kingdom among his heirs; the Cooper offspring divvy up Barc and his wife. Part of the poignance of their escape from the family is that we know (from an economic standpoint) it is only temporary and will end with final separation. Elder statesman Carlton and his wife have no such problem.

But most telling is the film's final evocation of a Borzagean motif, the *sanctum sanctorum*. John and Mary are planning to return to their frontier home, *Secrets'* equivalent lovers' space. Mary reaffirms their commitment as a couple when she declares to their children "We have secrets". But we know the sacred space is, here, the site of bloodshed, where both the terms of the nuclear family and the bourgeois state were consolidated, and that among the couple's secrets is the relationship between the family and the state. It is impossible to view reaffirmation in *Secrets* with anything but bleakness.

Robert K. Lightning is a freelance critic living in New York.

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